

## **12 Keys to Spiritual Maturity: Growing Down to Grow Up**

**Philippians 2:5-11**

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Turn with me if you would to Philippians chapter 2, and we're going to pick up the reading at verse 5, and we're going to read to verse 11.

Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, and at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. To the glory of God the Father.

Amen. May God bless His word to us. Let's pray together.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace, so grant it Lord, we pray for Jesus sake. Amen.

I come this evening to the last in a series of twelve which I have called, *Twelve Keys to Spiritual Maturity*. I thought long and hard this week about changing this one. I wondered if it was inappropriate. Then the more I thought about it, it's always appropriate to think about Jesus, no matter what the context, no matter what the situation, no matter what the hurt, or the pain, or the anger, or the frustration, it is always right to think about Jesus. So let's think about Him.

What would Jesus do? Sometimes that's an inappropriate question to ask, for several reasons. First of all, Jesus was God and we are not, and there are things that He said and did that come from the fact that He was God. Then again, Jesus had a task to perform that you and I do not have. We have a similar task to perform and we will come to that, but we are not called upon to be the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, and so there are times when it is inappropriate to ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" But despite that, I think it is a question that's

worth asking. What would Jesus do? I mean tonight, I mean this week, I mean in the context of everything that has transpired in the last five days.

It's been an extraordinary week. I'm not an American, but I hurt with you. I called my mother yesterday, and you need to understand that my mother and I are at opposite ends of the spectrum politically. We get along fine as long as we don't talk about politics. She once said to my elder brother about twenty years ago, "I have no strong opinions about anything" she said. We nearly died. She said she had been down in the town where she lives and yesterday at eleven o'clock all the doors shut, all the banks, all the offices, everyone was standing outside the city hall with the Welsh flag and the American flag, and they held a three-minute silence. She went to the Christian bookstore in the town and the people there said, "Please remember us to your son's friends in the United States," so I do that. of concerts, this is only for the choir now.

In London there are Sir Henry promenade concerts, and yesterday was the finally concert in a series. As a teenage boy I would often attend these concerts and it is usually an occasion to celebrate everything that's British. I don't like it very much, it's a little sycophantic. But this year, for the first time ever the conductor was an American, Leonard Slatkin, the former conductor of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. And of course the program had to be completely changed. They played Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* and the last movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, but the evening began as it has never begun before in its 120 years of its existence. It began with *The Stars and Stripes*.

So I ask the question, what would Jesus do? We need to be clear as we come to this extraordinary, beautiful passage this evening. And we won't have time to look into all the depth and profundities of this passage, but I'm asking the question. As individual Christians you understand, there are things that the state does that individual Christians can not do. It is appropriate for the state sometimes to take life in acts of war, but for the individual, unless it's in self defense, it is murder. You understand the difference? I'm not asking, "What is it appropriate for the state to do?" I'm asking, "What is it appropriate for the Christian to do?" and I'm asking it in these terms: "What would Jesus do?"

If you're looking at this passage tonight in the New International Version, and probably less than half of you are, it's in the form of a poem, because it perhaps was a poem, perhaps it was a hymn, perhaps composed by Paul. It certainly sounds as if it was composed by Paul, but perhaps not, perhaps it was already in existence and being sung in the early church. And Paul introduces it here as he writes to his beloved Philippian church whom he loved perhaps more than any other church, and they loved him.

And there are a few things I want us to see this evening; in verses 6 through 8, the attitude of Christ to the incarnation, and in verses 9 through 11, the attitude of God to the incarnation and then back in verse 5, our attitude toward the

incarnation.

## I. The attitude of Christ to the Incarnation.

First of all, what is the attitude of Christ to the incarnation? There are three things that are said here that we need to try and grasp very, very quickly. First of all, he tells us something of His attitude to what He was by nature. Being in the form of God. That is to say, he would go on and speak of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the infleshment of Jesus Christ. But Paul wants us to understand that before the incarnation, and indeed, during the incarnation, He was in the form of God. This little word form is one of those little words that, when you open it up, it's just full of ideas. He may be borrowing a word from classical Greek, in which case he needs us to understand that Jesus possessed all of the characteristics of God. He, more likely, is using the word that comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and particularly the book of Genesis, where the book of Genesis describes the creation of man as being in the *image* and *likeness* of God.

Which ever way it is, Paul wants us to appreciate one very simple thing, that everything that God is, Jesus Christ is. All of the qualities, all of the attributes, all of the characteristics, all of the distinctive of deity belong to Jesus Christ. He was in possession of all of the attributes of God. He was as fully God as the Father is God. He was as fully God as the Holy Spirit is God. But, Paul says, and look at the verse carefully, "being in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped." That is, He did not think this equality with God, which was by nature a thing to hold on to greedily, because it was already His. He didn't have to reach out and grasp it, perhaps Paul is saying, because He already possessed it. It was already His.

Many of you are familiar with C.S. Lewis' *The Lion The Witch And The Wardrobe*, in which the children, you remember, go through the back of the wardrobe and find themselves in Narnia. In a passage toward the end of the seven books, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there is a character called Tyrian who goes through a hut and discovers himself in a vast new world of beauty and grandeur. And one of the children, who up to this point hasn't said anything, says to him, "In our world, a stable once held something that was bigger than the whole world." He was in the form of God.

Notice the second thing that he says here, His attitude toward His coming in the flesh. He made Himself nothing. The New American Standard Version says, "He emptied Himself," which is a literal rendition of what Paul says. "He made Himself," The Authorized Version says, of no reputation." He emptied Himself. All you need to understand now is that we're on the very edge, we're on the very precipice, because you need to understand what Paul is saying and what Paul is not saying. Did He empty Himself of His deity? The choir, now remember what you sang this morning, "He laid aside His mighty power, His mighty and glory."

Hum, uh, perhaps with a thousand qualifications, but perhaps. What is Paul saying? That something extraordinary happened in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. That though He was in the form of God and He never, ever, ceased to be God. He so veiled the trappings and the paraphernalia of deity that when He came into this world you could not see His deity anymore, except on certain occasions. He veiled His glory.

Now isn't that an extraordinary thing. It wasn't, you see, incarnation by subtraction so much as incarnation by addition. In addition to being God, He became a man. He became a servant. But what kind of servant? A servant, our *Shorter Catechism* says, in a low condition. The kind of servant who washes other disciples feet, a kind of servant who comes right down to where we are, so that we don't have a Savior this evening that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. Do you think that Jesus doesn't know what it is to be frustrated and angry and torn apart with grief and pain? Or think again, my friends, as He looked down upon Jerusalem and wept, and said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her little chicks underneath her wings, but you would not." Joe Torre, who had been a catcher and a broadcast announcer for the St. Louis Cardinals, shortly after he was named manager was interviewed by the New York Yankee's announcer, Phil Rizzuto. And this New York announcer, Phil Rizzuto, suggested to Joe Torre that the best place for a manager was way up in the stands somewhere, where he could see the whole field, to which Torre replied, "Upstairs you can't look into their eyes." And we have a Savior tonight who can look us right in the eye, who has been where we have been.

And notice also a third thing, His attitude toward His mission in the world. As thought that were not enough, He takes the further step, Paul says, and "became obedient unto death, even, even the death of the cross." You see, I think Paul is drawing a contrast with Adam. Whereas Adam grasped equality with God and lost his life, Jesus had no need to grasp equality with God, but laid down His life. He laid it down for the likes of you and me. You know, in the trauma and the pain and hurt, there is a tremendous sense of assurance that comes from knowing our relationship with Jesus Christ, that we have a Savior who has died for us, who has gone to the cross for us, who has born the unmitigated wrath of God for us.

Think for a minute, think for a minute of the transfiguration. You remember at the transfiguration up on the mountain with Peter and John the other disciples, and there on that mountain, what is it when the gospel writers describe Jesus being transfigured, shining like the brilliance of a lightning flash, and hearing the assuring words of His Father in Heaven, "My Son, My Son, I love You, I love You." And don't you think Jesus was tempted to say, "And Father, when I lay down My life for the sheep, I want it to be just like this. I want it to be on a mountain just like this. I want it to be surrounded by the glory, surrounded by the shekinah cloud, surrounded by the paraphernalia that assures Me of My vital living relationship with You; to hear Your voice saying, "I love you, I love you."

Don't you think He was tempted to say that? And instead, instead He cries out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" In the darkness, and in the horror, and in the blackness, like being buried beneath all that rubble in New York tonight. And Jesus did that for the likes of you and me, but we need to move on.

## **II. The Attitude of God toward the Incarnation.**

We need to move because, in the second place, there is the attitude of God towards the incarnation, and look at what Paul says, "Therefore, also God has highly exalted Him." And he has exalted Him in two way. He has given to Him, first of all, a name which is above every name, "that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and tongue confess that He is Lord." That Jesus Christ is Lord. Isn't that a wonderful, wonderful name for Jesus to bear, that He is the Lord of glory.

But He exalts Him in another way, by the recognition He secures for Him because Paul says, "every knee shall bow, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord." Imagine that it's going to be a bit like the *Hallelujah Chorus* by Handel multiplied by ten million. It's going to be like Beethoven's final movement in his symphony without that awful, humanistic, Schiller's *Ode To Joy*. Burn that, but keep the music. And it will be a sound of voices upon voices upon voices, exalting Him as King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. That which we know in our hearts now will be proclaimed from the roof tops. 'One day, the trumpet will sound for His coming. On that day the skies with His glory will shine. Wonderful day my beloved one is bringing. Glorious Savior, this Jesus is Mine.'

## **III. Our attitude toward the Incarnation.**

But there is a third thing that I want us to see because this is where I want us to go tonight. Not only Jesus' attitude toward incarnation; not only the Father's attitude toward the incarnation, and all of you theologians and seminary students, you just sit quiet. I know there is more in this passage than I have ample time to deal with. It's one of the richest theological passages in the New Testament, and there is no way that I can do justice to it, but I want us to get on to the practical things, because why is Paul singing this wonderful hymn? You know, Paul wasn't one avoid dealing with something as trivial as the way the people of God in Philippi got on with each other. He wants to deal with something as trite and trivial as two women who seem to be falling out with each other. He seems to be dealing with something so trivial as collecting for the poor Christians in Jerusalem and in order to make an application that's suitable, he brings in this enormous baggage of theology about Jesus. Look at what he says in verse 5, "Let this mind" or "Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus." What would Jesus do? What does Christian maturity look like? As we've been thinking

about it over these last three months or so, what does it look like? And Paul is saying, "Take a look at Jesus lying in a stall in Bethlehem."

I was reading an account of a description in a newspaper of the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to the United States, and all the stuff that she has to bring with her. All the dresses, all the hats that she wears, all the jewelry, tons of it, and clothes for all the various things that could happen on her journey. Food, she's a very fussy eater, and doctors, and attendants. It costs millions to make a visit. When Jesus comes to this earth, He comes with nothing. He comes with nothing. He doesn't bring all the paraphernalia of deity with Him. He doesn't bring the glory. He doesn't bring the shekinah. He's in a manger in Bethlehem, with cows and oxen, and donkeys, and Paul is saying, "What does Christian maturity look like?" Look at Jesus lying in the manger in Bethlehem, and Christian maturity is like that. Look at Jesus washing disciple's feet. You might wash your spouse's feet, I don't want to go down this road too far now, but you understand you might do that. But for the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, who didn't think that deity was something to be grasped at because it was already His, as He washes the feet of His disciples. And Paul is saying, "Christian maturity looks like that." What does Christian maturity look like? Paul says, "You look at the bleeding form that's hanging upon that cross at Calvary, with a crown of thorns upon His head and His naked form nailed to that Roman cross with nothing to claim for His own." And Paul is saying, "Christian maturity looks like that, when He made Himself of no reputation, when He didn't stand upon His dignity, He didn't stand upon His rights."

You know, all the problems in the world arise because we want to assert our rights. Yesterday, actually I think it was Friday, in that courtyard outside Buckingham Palace, you've probably been there, or at least you can see it in your mind's eye. And there are gates of course and some pillars and it's a big courtyard and in that courtyard, every morning, there is that little ceremony that takes place. I remember being taken up there as a little child to watch all those funny looking soldiers dressed in red with those big black Busby hats doing the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. It's a ritual that takes place every single day at the same time. It hasn't changed for centuries, except on this last Friday morning. On Friday morning when the changing of the guard took place at Buckingham Palace, the Queen ordered her own soldiers, who are there to protect her, to play the *Star Spangled Banner*. Now, they have every entitlement to play *Rule Britannia, God Save The Queen*, their own national anthem. They have every entitlement to do that. That's their right, but they forgo their right, and played something else. You understand the irony for British soldier of playing the *Star Spangled Banner*, I don't need to tell you that. And Paul is saying, that's where the trouble comes when we want to assert our rights, especially when you have a quarrel.

You don't have quarrels here at First Presbyterian Church. You always think about other people. Here, when you walk out of the house and you've had a

quarrel, you've had a tiff, you're saying to yourself, "Well, she started it, so I am going to wait until she calls me and apologizes and I'm not going to do anything until she does so." Or change it a bit to the other way around. And Paul is saying, the way to Christian maturity is that you go first, even if she did start it, you be the first one to reconcile, you be the first one to lift the phone and say, "Look, I'm sorry, let's talk, let's meet for lunch." And it's the same in church. It's the same amongst God's people. All kinds of trouble erupts because you want to assert your rights. No one is denying that it is your right, but Paul says, "What does Christian maturity look like?" It is Jesus-shaped. It is Jesus-shaped, who emptied Himself, who denied Himself of what was His right and took the form of the lonely servant.

My dear friends, will you be a servant? In all of the tragedy of this week, God has ways of humbling us, humbling our pride and humbling our arrogance, and maybe, for at least some of us, God is saying, "Will you be My servant, will you serve Me? Will you trust Me? Will you walk with me the way Jesus walked with Me?"

Let's pray together.

Our Father in Heaven, we thank You for Your words, we thank You that in every time and every place and every circumstance the beautiful form of Jesus laying down His life for us brings to us a remembrance of what we truly are. Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God should die for me. Give us meekness, give us humility, make us more and more like Jesus we pray. For Jesus sake. Amen.

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