

HUMILITATION AND EXALTATION

Text: Philippians 2:5-11

Belgic Confession Art 19

Readings: Psalm 110, Philippians 2:1-11.

Theme: We are to imitate the humility of Jesus who was God and humbled himself to become a man.

Purpose: To help us understand Jesus as God and man and to encourage us to humility.

This is one of the great passages in the New Testament about Jesus Christ. It gives us a profound theology of his person and work.

Theology is the study of God. Many think theology is theoretical and impractical, but that is not so! In the Bible many practical instructions arise directly out of great theological truths about our triune God, as we see in this passage.

In verses 1 to 4 Paul gave very practical instructions to the church in Philippi. He has established this church during his second missionary journey. The first converts were Lydia who traded in purple cloth, and the Philippian jailer and his household. The church grew and was very generous in its support of the apostle Paul.

But there was some disunity in the church and Paul urged them to “be like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” He urged them to show humility, “considering others better than themselves” (v 2f). He then gave them the example of the Lord Jesus and urged them to have the same attitude, to think the same thoughts as Jesus, to have the mind of Christ.

Verses 6 to 11 give us an outstanding description of who Jesus is and what he has done. Many Christian commentators believe that this was an early Christian hymn in praise of our Lord. It describes his two natures, that he was both God and man in the one person. And it describes, what theologians have called, his two states, his humiliation as a man and exaltation as God and man.

Today we will consider his humiliation, his exaltation and an application.

1. HIS HUMILIATION

The Apostle Paul tells us that Jesus was "**in very nature God.**"

This was true of Jesus as the eternal Son of God, Jesus in his pre-incarnate state before he became a man; but here Paul is describing Jesus Christ, as the God-man, as the divine-human person, who came to live in this world for a short time.

This Jesus, while he was on earth as a man, was “in very nature God”. Literally the Greek reads “being in the form of God.” The word used for form or nature refers to the inner reality of a person, their essential form or attributes. Jesus had the very essence of God. Jesus was, and is, all that God is. He was and is fully God and he had all the attributes and characteristics of God. Paul here states the full and complete deity of Jesus Christ while he was on earth.

While on earth Jesus “he did not consider **equality with God** something to be grasped.”

Jesus was equal with God. As the second person of the trinity he was on the same level as God the Father. He was equal in might and standing, in power and glory. Jesus had every divine attribute that God the Father had and that God the Holy Spirit had.

But he did not consider this "**something to be grasped.**" (v 6)

We need to remember that Jesus was the second Adam, the second representative of the human race.

The first Adam was tempted by Satan who told him that he would be “like God” knowing good and

evil. Adam fell for this; he wanted to be like God, he wanted to grasp what did not belong to him, to seize equality with God.

Jesus, as the second Adam, right at the beginning of his ministry, was also tempted by Satan. Satan tempted Jesus to use his divine power for his own advantage, to assert his rights as the Son of God, to bypass the path of obedience God had set for him and to take a shortcut. Satan tempted Jesus to disobey the will of his Father and to take matters into his own hands, to grasp hold of his divine power and use it for his own benefit!

But Jesus resisted that temptation. He knew he was equal with God and he knew that he had come into this world to do his Father's will and to save his people. He knew this would require obedience and suffering and even death, and he was prepared to follow this through.

Instead of using his power for his own advantage he "**made himself nothing**" (v 7). Literally the Greek reads: "But he emptied himself." Scholars have spent a lot of time on this phrase. What does this mean?

It does not mean that he emptied himself of his divinity, nor that he ceased to be God, nor that he emptied himself of any of the divine attributes he had. As the Son of God on earth he remained all wise, holy, just, all-knowing, all-seeing, even everywhere present.

Rather, the phrase "made himself nothing", is parallel to the phrase in verse 8 which says "he humbled himself". It means that Jesus gave up his life, he was willing to die. It picks up the phrase Isaiah used when he wrote, "he poured out his life unto death" (Is 53:12). Jesus gave himself up as a sacrifice for sin. This is what we remember regularly in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This is the great humiliation of our Lord Jesus, that he was willing to die for us.

Jesus took "**the very nature of a servant**" (v7).

He had the very nature of God and he took on the very nature of a man. He did not give up any of his divinity; rather he added humanity to his divinity. There was no subtraction of his divine nature but the addition of a human nature.

While he was on earth he was a servant, a slave, a nobody; he said about himself, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). He took "the very nature of a servant."

He was "**made in human likeness**" and "**found in appearance as a man** (v7b & 8a).

Anyone looking at him saw an ordinary human being, a man, just like any one of us. That is how the Jews saw him, "Isn't this Jesus, the son of Joseph, the carpenter?"

This is why so many dismissed his claims of being God, because to them he appeared to be so human, so ordinary. And he was; he took on himself a human nature, just like us, fully man, completely human. (cf. Rom 8:3)

He was God but he humbled himself so that he subjected himself to the limitations of a human existence and to the sickness and pain of a human body.

There were times when people could see the majesty and power of his divine nature, as when he instantly stilled the waves on the Sea of Galilee, and when he raised Lazarus, and when he gave sight to a man born blind, and when he forgave a woman her sins. The disciples saw his majesty on the Mount of Transfiguration when his clothes became dazzling white while he was speaking to Moses and Elijah. But most of the time most of the people saw him as just a man.

But his humiliation went even further and deeper than becoming a man, because "he humbled himself and became **obedient to death - even death on a cross!**" (v 8b)

When Phillip spoke to the Ethiopian eunuch they discussed Isaiah 53 and the "humiliation" of Jesus (Is 53:8; Acts 8:33).

The depth of his humiliation was that he was even prepared to die *on a cross!*

The mention of the cross would fill a Jew with loathing and disgust; in the Old Testament anyone who was hung on a tree was regarded as being cursed by God.

Even for the Romans death by crucifixion was reserved for criminals and no Roman citizen was allowed to be crucified. The Roman statesman Cicero described this as the “most cruel and hideous of punishments”. It was a terrifying and shocking form of execution. For Jesus to be put to death on a cross was the ultimate humiliation.

The hours he spent on the cross were his darkest; there he endured the agonies and torments of hell. During those three hours of darkness God the Father turned away from his Son. This was his greatest suffering; this was his lowest point.

All of this was part of his obedience.

“Although he was a son he learned obedience from what he suffered...” (Heb 5:8). He had come to do the will of his Father and this involved dying on a tree and so taking our curse on himself.

But after descending this far he began to *ascend*; after he had humbled himself his Father began to *exalt* him.

2. HIS EXALTATION

After his suffering and death God "exalted him to the highest place". This phrase translates just one word in the Greek. The NASB translates it as "highly exalted him." You could even translate it as "super-exalt!" It means that God gave him a position that was above and beyond everything in this world, a position that was unique and absolute.

This refers to the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension into heaven where he took his place at God's right hand, a place of honour and responsibility.

Moreover, God the Father gave him “the name that is above every name”, the name ‘Lord’. On the day of Pentecost Peter assured the Jews that “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

Before he became a man Jesus was already Lord and King over the universe. But after his death and resurrection Jesus ascended to heaven in a new position because he was the divine and human Son of God. During his time on earth he had been obedient to his Father and as a result he was “awarded” this position as the Lord of lords and the King of kings! For the Son of God this was a new experience of exaltation because he took up this position as God and man.

He will retain this position until he has put all his enemies under his feet (Ps 110:1).

One day **every knee will bow** to this Lord Jesus (v 10). Here the Apostle Paul looked ahead to the return of the Lord Jesus. When he comes again, every person in all the world will recognise that Jesus is Lord, believers and unbelievers. His people will confess him as Lord with joy and praise, and his enemies will acknowledge him as Lord as his defeated prisoners.

It is interesting that the first confession of the early Church was "Jesus is Lord": “If you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord’, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). This will also be the final and eternal confession of God's people.

3. An Application

a. The truths expressed in these verses are important for **our salvation**.

That Jesus was and is both God and man is not a fine theological point that we can pass over quickly. No, it is the foundation of all that we believe and it is basic to our salvation. If we were to be saved Jesus had to be both God and man.

The BC sums this up well in the closing lines of Article 19 when it says: "For this reason we profess him to be true God and true man: true God in order to conquer death by his power; and true man that he might die for us according to the infirmity of his flesh."

He had to be God because only God was powerful enough to deal with sin and death; he had to be man because a man had to die for sin. If you believe this you will be saved!

b. But this is also important for our **imitation**.

This is the application Paul draws out when he wrote in verse 5: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." He refers to the attitude of humility seen in the Lord Jesus. In verse 3 he wrote, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit."

If we were to examine our hearts closely we would have to admit that quite a lot of what we do is prompted by selfish ambition and vain conceit. Much of our activity and work is motivated by the desire to advance ourselves, to have others praise us, to gain prestige and a good name, to be admired and respected. All of us have an inbuilt sinful tendency to push ourselves forward.

But the Scriptures call us to humility. "In humility consider others better than yourselves" (v 3b). That doesn't mean that we should put ourselves down, nor that we should be unrealistic about our gifts and abilities.

Rather it means we must consider others before ourselves; put others first; think of others and their feelings and desires.

Paul wrote, "each of you should look not only to your own interest, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (v 3).

Consider who Jesus is and what he gave up. He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. He humbled himself, even going so far as to die in our place, on a cross!

He is our model and example in his humiliation.

And if "we share in his sufferings we will also share in his glory" (Rom 8:17). If you believe in the Lord Jesus God has already raised you up with Christ and seated you with him in the heavenly places, and when Jesus returns he will give you a place in that New Heaven and that New Earth where all of us will reign with Jesus our Lord, for all eternity!

Amen