



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Great Virtue

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ AUGUST 8, 2021

Introduction

Philippians has been called the **Letter of Joy**, because the words “joy” and “rejoice” are sprinkled throughout the letter. The word “joy” first appears in the opening section of the letter. Paul writes, “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with **joy** (verse 4).” Toward the end of the short letter, Paul encourages the Philippians to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” He repeats his call for joy, “Again I say, Rejoice!”

However, lest we imagine that the Letter of Joy emanates from the carefree circumstances of Paul, let’s understand the context. Paul can rejoice always, not because the circumstances of life are always pleasant, but because in humble times, he has learned the secret of being content. Here was the secret: He “can do all things through Christ who gives [him] strength.” This truth is evidenced by the very writing of this letter from a place of joy. Paul wrote the letter, which we now call Philippians, from prison (perhaps in Ephesus or, worse, in Rome). Even in that context, he is not focused upon himself or his own needs, but is concerned for his brothers and sisters in Philippi.

The church in Philippi was experiencing opposition. Philippi was the first place in Macedonia where Paul and his companions took the gospel message, partly because of its strategic place in the Roman Empire. From the moment the gospel was preached in Philippi, it was met with challenge. We learn in Acts 16 that when Paul plants the church in Philippi, he is wrongly arrested, stripped and beaten with rods. And just as during its inception, the Philippian church is

again meeting opposition from its neighbors in Philippi. What's more, not only was there opposition from outside the church, there was dissension within the ranks of the community.

In the heart of this Letter of Joy, amidst opposition and conflict, are some of the greatest high points of any of Paul's writings. If you read this passage in the NIV, you'll see the heading "Imitating Christ's Humility." Hear now the Word of the Lord.

2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be
used to his own advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:1-11

Well, it does not get much better than that! With that, let's close our worship. Our closing hymn this morning will be *May the Mind of Christ, My Savior*. Please stand and let's sing it together.

Okay—just kidding. But in all seriousness, what could possibly be added to such divinely inspired words? And they are just that! In fact, every portion of Scripture is inspired by the Spirit of God. And still, not all of Scripture soars with the lofty grandeur or the eloquence of this passage. This message—or the copious commentary written about the passage—could never surpass these beautiful words which depict the character and love of God in Christ Jesus.

Still, you came to hear the Word of God proclaimed with an application of the scriptures that will make sense of the world around us. So, by the grace of God alone, here goes.

Not a Central Virtue

In most cultures, humility has not been considered a central virtue. It certainly wasn't during the time period when Philippians was written. In the ancient world, the region that came to be known as Philippi was taken over by Philip II of Macedon, who, after conquering it renamed the city for himself. This is what ancient conquering leaders did. So, Philippi is named after Philip of Macedon. Philip's son was the infamous Alexander the Great; as his name suggests, the apple didn't fall far from the tree. At the age of 20 he succeeded his father Philip and quickly made himself the leader of all Greece, and then, as if that was not enough, he set out to conquer the rest of the known world. When he died at the age of 33 he had succeeded to such an extent that many worshiped him as divine. Just like his father, Alexander named a city after himself—Alexandria, Egypt. So, too, the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus named a city after himself; it was called Caesarea. The ancient "great" leaders would conquer an area and stamp their own name upon it as a way of trying to leave a mark on the world, to recreate the world in their own image. And this history echoes in the community in which the Philippian church resides as a part of their collective memory.

By the time the Philippian church was planted, it was a Roman colony. With the legacy of Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, and every other leader like them obsessed with stamping their name upon the world they ruled, those in Philippi proudly considered themselves to be citizens of Rome. They were proud citizens who proclaimed the Roman Emperor Nero as *lord*. And Nero was just like the leaders who preceded him, only worse. It suffices to say that what people valued in leadership was not humility, but a narcissistic form of leadership filled with selfish ambition and vain conceit.

Modern Leadership

So when *Philippians* was written, humility was not a central value. But that was then. What about now? We wouldn't value that type of leadership today, would we?

Perhaps a modern day and *hypothetical* analog would be if there were, let's say, three centi-billionaire CEOs of powerful, publicly traded companies who were leaders of industry. And having conquered the known economic world, this world was no longer enough to satisfy. So these hypothetical billionaire CEOs sought to conquer space travel, competing with one another to be the pioneers of humanity's commercial space exploration. I know, it's all just science fiction. Perhaps this is too hypothetical, but let's just imagine together. Imagine that these CEOs all wanted to be the first into space. But when one got there first, the other leader insisted that he and his crew traveled higher above the earth in his spaceship than the CEO who made it to space first. Not only did he and his crew travel higher, but their spacecraft had larger windows.

I personally have nothing against space travel and I mean no disrespect to those "hypothetical" leaders. God's universe is wonderfully vast, and it is exciting to think about the exploration of it. However, I have a suspicion that what drives these leaders and many other leaders today is the human ego.

Leadership author Michael Maccoby has observed that, since the 1990s, the modern business leader has been changing. The traditional CEOs who cut costs, improved productivity, and increased profitability have been pushed aside with a new breed of “visionary” leaders. These leaders come with a conviction that they can “change the world.” As a case in point, Maccoby points to the CEO of Amazon who graced the cover of the 1999 Person of the Year issue of TIME magazine with a subheading that read, “E-commerce is changing the way the world shops.” In his own words, Maccoby refers to these leaders as “Narcissistic Leaders,” driven by the passion to change the world and recreate it in their image. He actually goes so far as to say that, because of the complexity of the globalized economy, this type of leadership may be necessary in today’s business world environment.

In other words, just like ancient Philippi in the Roman Empire, what we value in leadership today is not humility or servant leadership, but a different kind of leadership, one that is filled with ambition that wants to stamp the leader’s own name not only on the known world, but upon other worlds as well. It is a leadership filled with selfish ambition—or pride.

The Great Sin

In *Mere Christianity* (one of his most famous works), British writer and lay theologian C.S. Lewis identifies pride as “The Great Sin.” Dedicating an entire chapter to it, Lewis suggests that pride is at the center of and even leads to all other vices. In fact, in no uncertain terms, Lewis says that pride is what made the Devil, the devil. It should not, then, surprise us that the first human sin was pride. When Adam and Eve are offered the prohibited fruit of the garden, what enticed them was not merely that it looked good to eat, for there must have been other things that looked good to eat in Eden. What enticed them was the vain promise that if they ate it, they would become *like God*. The pride of the human heart, desirous to become like God, took root and led to the eating of the forbidden fruit. Pride is always like that.

Lewis contends that pride is essentially competitive. It finds no joy in something in and of itself, but only in comparison with others. We are perfectly happy with our golf club or cell phone or compensation or whatever ... until someone else has the latest and greatest. Then, when compared to the other, what we have is no longer good enough. We desire to be first, to be better, to fly higher, and have bigger windows on the ship. This is the competitive nature of pride. We often find the pride of one person bumping up against the pride of another, and the resulting fruit is enmity.

This was certainly true in the Philippian church. There was not only opposition from the outside world, there was also internal drama. There are some leaders who are trying to take advantage of Paul's imprisonment to grab power. Paul suggests they are doing so out of selfish ambition and vain conceit. There are others who are struggling to agree with one another. And so to this context, Paul encourages them. Saying it about three different ways, Paul writes:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Consider others above yourselves. Perhaps a good working definition would be this: Pride is being absorbed with the self.

Absorbed with Self

I have to be honest: I'm concerned. Our world today has become more than a little self-absorbed. Have you noticed this? It affects everything. It has even affected how we take pictures. Since the creation of the camera, cameras were designed to take pictures of others. No longer. Today, we put cameras on both sides of our phones, just so we can take pictures of ourselves. Have you ever taken a selfie? Some

have used that word to define an entire generation. Have you heard of the “selfie generation”? But, honestly, the Great Sin of pride is not found in just one generation. It’s not a new sin at all, but the original one, and all humanity has struggled with pride.

Our self-absorption also shows up in our language. Think about how many words have the word “self” as a prefix. We are on a quest for self-actualization. We are enamored with the pursuit of self-worth. We are captivated by the concern for our children’s self-esteem. I hear a lot of people talking about self-care. There is an entire section of books in many bookstores written on the topic of self-help. Especially after the pandemic, many have sought to be self-employed—to be their own boss. People take pride in being self-made. Some of us even prefer self-checkout. There is no greater concern today than finding ourselves and expressing ourselves.

We may have become a little self-absorbed. I do not mean to belittle the self. There is room in God’s kingdom for self-love, but it is always subordinated to the love and pursuit of God, poured into our hearts through faith, which enables us to love our neighbor as ourselves. There is nothing wrong with self-care or self-esteem. The problem is when we become absorbed with the self. The obsession with the self is the Great Sin, and its fruit is enmity against God and between ourselves and others.

If the Great Sin is pride, then the opposite of pride—the antidote—would be the Great Virtue of Humility.

Grasping for Humility

Humility has never been a world value; from the outset, however, Christianity has upheld the value of humility. The Catch-22 of human pride is that the pursuit of humility itself often results in the development of pride. The more humble we believe we are and the more we declare ourselves to be so, the less confident we can be in our humility. Grasping for humility is like trying to hold water in your hands. If you grasp for humility, you will not hold it. Simply put, we cannot grasp humility by focusing on ourselves.

The word humility in the New Testament is a compound word that implies considering one's own needs less. Tim Keller, in a book entitled *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, quotes C.S. Lewis on the subject:

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* makes a brilliant observation about gospel-humility at the very end of his chapter on pride [Chapter 8]. "If we were to meet a truly humble person... we would never come away from meeting them thinking they were humble. The thing we would remember from meeting a truly gospel-humble person is how much they seemed to be totally interested in us. Because the essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less."

Humility inherently isn't self-oriented; it is self-forgetful. It thinks of self less and is therefore interested more in others. So, Paul writes, "in humility, consider others above yourselves." And immediately he points us beyond the focus on others to Jesus. Because if you try to grasp for humility, you will never hold it, but if you cling to Christ, you will be held by Him and as long as you stay in Him, you will find humility.

The Good News

Here is the most amazing good news. The all-powerful creator God, who laid the foundations of the earth, gave up the need for glory. It's just like we have sung over and over in the wonderful Christmas hymn (*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*): "mild he lays his glory by." Jesus set aside His own glory by taking on the form of a servant, being made in human likeness. He was like us in every way, except without sin—especially the great sin of pride. Consider the contrast! Though He was God himself, unlike Adam and Eve, He didn't consider equality with God as something to be grasped. In other words, whereas Adam and Eve were grasping to be like God, Jesus wasn't filled with that selfish ambition. His whole life was about giving up that glory.

It was through Christ's humility that He purchased our salvation. He humbled himself and became obedient, even to death on a cross—during which time He was not considering Himself, but was thinking of you and of me.

Paul says, if we have any fellowship in the Spirit, our mindset should be the same. But we will never become humble by trying to be humble, for that is still a focus upon the self. The true path to humility is clinging to Christ. By submitting ourselves to Him and placing our trust in Him, the Spirit of God indwells us, and God helps us focus on others as over ourselves. We eventually stop thinking so often of ourselves; Keller calls it “free to become self-forgetful.” Whereas the fruit of pride is enmity, the fruit of humility is restored community.

As a pastor of this church, I cannot tell you what a privilege it is to be surrounded by such excellent leaders. I am blessed to serve alongside some of the finest Christian men and women I have ever met—both staff and members. What is more compelling to me, though, is the humble leadership embodied among the team. Modeled most poignantly by our senior leader and embodied among the staff at large—Pastor Steven and I discuss this all the time—there is no ego to contend with. I share this with you not to puff us up, but because the world often values other types of leadership. Celebrity leadership, visionary leadership, otherwise ego-centric leadership—leadership that will change the world and seek to recreate it in its own image. The testimony of this church is otherwise. What the church of the 21st century needs is leadership committed to clinging to Jesus, imitating Christ’s humility, and leading lives worthy of the calling we have received, seeking not our own glory, but the Glory of God for the world.

The pattern in the scriptures is that those who exalt themselves are humbled, but those who humble themselves are exalted. Jesus humbled Himself, and God gave Him the name that is above every name. And it starts with us.

So, here’s where it gets personal: Is there any strife or enmity in your life? If it is true that pride is the Great Sin and source of many secondary vices, and if you were to be honest with yourself, how much of the conflict is the fruit of someone’s pride? How much are you contributing? Let’s take that to Jesus, cling to Him and invite Him to help us through to humility. ■



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