

*Follow the Leader (Phil. 2:5-11)*

Some of the earliest memories of preacher R. T. Kendall are witnessing his father spend thirty minutes in the morning before work on his knees as he read the Bible and prayed. From this example, Kendall learned what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus and a man of prayer. Those early experiences have shaped him well into his eighties. Some of you learned what it meant to be a Christian in the same way. You witnessed the faith and heard the prayers of some beloved family member who went before you. This is the power of example. It is, of course, true in a wide range of activities. You may have had a mentor in your career, someone who showed you the ropes. If you are or were an athlete, then you probably had heroes who you learned to imitate - the way he shot a three or the way she fast pitched. I had a professor in college who was masterful at answering questions in such a way as to bring things back around to the main discussion. Not only did I learn a few things from him, I even took on a few of his hand gestures. This is how God has created us as human beings. We are designed to learn through imitation and example. At the end of last week's message, I pointed out that joyful community cannot be created in our own strength. We do not have the wisdom or moral power to realize it. In 2:5, Paul turns the attention of his audience to the story of Jesus. In order to be people who share the same love and pursue like-mindedness, Paul offers the following command: "Have this mind among you which is also in Christ Jesus." Translations vary: Have the same attitude as Jesus. Have the same mindset as Jesus. The meaning here is clear. **If you want to live a worthy life, then you must follow your leader.**

In the following verses, Paul offers what has been called **a hymn of Christ**. Because vv. 6-11 have such a clear poetic structure, many people through the years have concluded that it is an early hymn of faith which was used in the church from its childhood. Even if that is not true, Paul's theology here is consistent with all the documents of the New Testament and all we know of the beliefs of the earliest Christians. Whatever their origin, the words are here used as a presentation of the gospel which provokes God's people to like-mindedness. As we will see, the good news here is twofold. **First, it gives us**

**an example to imitate. Second, it proclaims our salvation even when we lack the power to walk in imitation of Christ.**

Before I unpack those two points, I suppose we should simply review the hymn itself. Verses 6-11 have the form of **a parabola**, a shape with a downward slope followed by an upward slope. The poem starts with Jesus in his pre-incarnate glory. It moves to its vertex, the lowest point, at the cross. The poem ends with Christ's post-resurrection exaltation. **Heaven, down to the depths, and then back up to heaven.** The structure of the downward slope is three actions of the person of the Son of God. The structure of the upward slope is two actions of God the Father, resulting in two outcomes concerning the Son. The three actions of the Son are as follows.

1. **He did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped.** The Son of God had the "form" of God, meaning the Second Person of the Trinity eternally possessed the full nature of God. Yet, he decided with his will to humble himself for our salvation. In our Reformed tradition, we speak of the Covenant of Redemption. We believe that the Father elected to save a people from sin, and that the Son consented to be the one to carry out the Father's rescue plan. He chose in eternity past to agree to be our savior.
2. **He emptied himself.** This is a reference to the actual incarnation. He took up the "form" (same word) of a servant. Jesus did not empty himself of his divinity, but instead he took up a full human nature. The "emptying" is paradoxically an act of addition. However, in taking up this "form," he veiled his glory. He was made in the likeness of men and found in the appearance of a man. The word often translated as appearance is the word from which we derive *scheme* or *schematic*. We might say that he was found according to the blueprint of humanity. The Son never laid aside his divinity, yet he did conceal it voluntarily.
3. **He humbled himself.** This is a reference to the direction of his earthly ministry. He submitted to his parents. He lived a simple lifestyle. He spent his time and energy healing the sick, liberating the possessed, and forgiving the sins of the broken. His humility took him to the lowest point imaginable – death on a Roman cross. Crucifixion was designed to

humiliate and shame even as it inflicted massive amounts of pain. We know as well that the full work of the cross also included the bearing of the sins of the world, allowing himself to be soaked in the degradation and suffering of humanity. This is the low point of the parabola.

But now we can speak of the two actions of God the Father and the two results for the Son which form the structure of the upward slope of the parabola.

1. **God highly exalted him.** Jesus rose from the dead in victory. He ascended to the right hand of the Father, still bearing our human nature. He exalted us as he carried our nature with him into heaven. His reign and rule over all things have been inaugurated. One day it will be consummated, when he returns to put all things to rights.
2. **God bestowed on him the highest name.** The name of Jesus is no longer a name of scorn and shame, the name of a crucified criminal. Instead, the name of Jesus is the name of the exalted Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity. His name is a revelation of his Father. We baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. We pray in the name of Jesus. We pray for the return of Jesus.
3. **Every knee will bow to Jesus.** The first result is that all things will be in submission to Jesus. All the angelic hosts and demonic powers will bow before Jesus. All earthly powers will be brought low before his throne. The strong will be brought down, even as those who are already low will be raised up.
4. **Every tongue will confess he is Lord.** The second result of the Father's exaltation and bestowal is that everyone will confess the Lordship of Jesus. Some will do so as those who trust him and love him, as those who depend on his mercy. Some will do so as defeated rebels who must acknowledge his judgment and power. The confession of his Lordship will bring glory to the Father. After all, the Father, Son, and Spirit are one God, equally glorious, each Person bearing the full divine nature. Consequently, the declaration of the Lordship of the Son must also be glorifying to the Father, even as it is glorifying to the Spirit, who is also called Lord (2 Corinthians 3:17).

These are the two slopes of the parabola. Heaven, down to the depths, then back up to heaven. I hope you are now able to realize the two points of application that I mentioned earlier. **Paul gives this hymn of Christ as a means of realizing joyful community.** Let us briefly see how.

**First, we must follow our leader by imitating Jesus.** We were made to learn by example. Jesus gives us a picture of someone who chose to serve others, who veiled his glory for the sake of love, and who acted in humility though it brought him low. If we want to be like-minded with the ability to complete one another's joy, then we must pursue service with humility. How do we follow our leader? We keep taking the next step of humility before us. Find someone to love with an act of service this week. After you do that, keep going. Never stop and say, "I have done my good deed." That is not the way of Christ. When you have served, thank God for the opportunity and then begin looking for the next opportunity. When that moment has passed, do it again! I believe that God will richly bless us with opportunities to serve if we simply commit ourselves to keep serving with a spirit of humility.

**Second, this story of Jesus proclaims our salvation even as we fail to walk in Christ's example.** If you are anything like me, then there is a part of you which staggers before the thought of living a life of Christ-like humility, in which you are constantly looking for the next way to serve. How could any of us ever hope to live this way? The truth is that we will fall short. Yet, notice what the hymn proclaims. The Father's actions result not in people who perfectly imitate the Son, but in people who bow their knee before him and confess him as Lord. Jesus came to save people who could not save themselves; he came to rescue people who could not follow in his footsteps perfectly. We cannot earn his love or pay him back for what he has done. Instead, we bow the knee and call him Lord, and we do so in faith. The promise of the gospel is that as we do so, we receive assurance of his eternal love, even as the Spirit dwells in our hearts to help us follow in the footsteps of Jesus, not perfectly but one step at a time as we grow in the faith. Let us each follow our leader!