

Sermon for Sunday, October 21, 2013
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The Secret Power of Joy
Phil 2:1-11

We're in a series on Paul's letter to the Philippians and as we've been going through the first chapter, one of the things we've seen is that in the midst of incredible suffering, Paul has overwhelming joy. In most of the first chapter, Paul is talking about himself and how he's responding to his circumstances. But at the end of the chapter, and heading into chapter 2, he begins to relate his experience to the Philippians, and talk to them about how they should respond to it. Because they're going through some similar things as well. Just like Paul, they're experiencing opposition from people outside the Christian community. Cultural forces are against them, and we'll talk a lot more about that next week. But also like Paul, they're experiencing division within the Christian community. And even though it's not desperate – the situation hasn't reached crisis level – the seeds are there. And if they're not careful, it could tear the church apart. So Paul tells them over and over again that he wants them to be of the same mind, the same love, the same spirit. He wants them to be united. And to help them deal with that problem, he takes some time to talk to them about what just might be the biggest problem facing humankind. There could be one or maybe two other things that might be top vote-getter for “biggest problem facing humanity.” But this is one of them, maybe even the biggest. The biggest problem facing the world, the biggest problem facing the church and the biggest problem facing each one of us. What is it?

G.K. Chesterton was a great Christian writer in London in the early 20th century. And there's a famous old story about something he once said. The story may not even be true, but if it's not, it's so utterly characteristic of the kind of thing he would say that it's become even more popular. And the story goes like this. The Times newspaper asked several of the leading authors of the day to write an essay on the subject of “What's Wrong With The World?” And Chesterton was one of the authors they asked to submit an essay. “What's Wrong With The World?” And here's the essay Chesterton sent them. “Dear sirs, I am. Sincerely yours, G.K. Chesterton.”

What's the biggest problem in the world? It really all comes down to one word. Two letters: all caps, all bold. What is it? **ME**. That's the biggest problem in the world. And I don't mean each one of us personally or individually, I mean the attitude, the mindset behind that word. That no matter how much we might serve others, it's incredibly difficult, if not impossible, for our lives ultimately not to be all about **ME**. That's the problem, but Paul says there's an answer. And the answer is humility. And he shows us three things about it: the problem of humility, the practice of humility, and the power for humility. First,

The problem of humility – Paul says that humility is the solution to this problem we have. But we have to explore this problem a little more in depth. We have to understand the diagnosis before we can embrace the cure. We just said this problem is **ME**, specifically the attitude, or mindset, behind it. And like any diagnosis of an illness, there are symptoms, and then there's the source. And we see both the symptom and the source in this passage. And they're right here in **verse 3**. Paul says, “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.” The symptom of our problem is selfish ambition. This is the way our problem manifests itself in the world. Selfishness, factions, rivalry, fighting, inability to forgive, a sense of entitlement, you see? But all of this is just the symptom. It's not the source. What is?

It's this next word, which is translated here as "conceit." But that doesn't really get across the meaning of it. Different versions of the Bible will all translate this word in different ways because it's such a deep word, and such a complex word to translate into English. It's the Greek word *kenodoxia*. It's made up of two words put together. *Keno* means empty. And *doxa* means glory. Literally it means "empty of glory." Glory in the Bible means a lot more than just fame or radiance. It means weight, substance, and significance. It means matter. And if there's one thing human beings long for, it's to know that we matter. We yearn for glory. And if there's one other thing that human beings know deep down in the depths of their being, it's that we don't currently have it. We long for glory, and we know we don't have it. Every human being experiences *kenodoxia*. We're empty of glory. We're hungry right in the center, and we're constantly striving to fill that glory-hunger.

Madonna once gave an interview in Vogue magazine in which she talked about this. Listen to what she says: "I have an iron will, and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy... I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and think I'm mediocre and uninteresting... again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that's always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I've become Somebody, I still have to prove that I'm Somebody. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will."

Now, we could look down on Madonna. We could say she's just insecure. We could say maybe she wasn't affirmed by her parents when she was growing up. But I'll tell you something. All of us have sustained emotional wounds in life. Some have experienced more. Some have experienced less. Tragically, it's often those of us who are most wounded who are also most self-absorbed. But we need to be clear. The wounds don't create this glory-hunger. They just exacerbate it. We have to be so careful when we talk about this. It's like doing soul-surgery. It's like going in and putting the scalpel on something so deep and so powerful, but if we don't do it, the cancer just grows and grows. We're all hungry for glory. We're all empty in the center, even those of us who had the best homes, and the healthiest parents. And that means there are probably a lot of us here who relate to Madonna, whether you're driven and successful, or whether you feel like a failure in life. If we're honest with ourselves, we can all relate to this.

And that means that we will do the things we do, no matter how noble, selfless, or caring they look, we will do them because we're looking for something that we know we were made for, but don't have. We were made for glory. The first humans had it in the Garden of Eden. They had it, but they lost it. And there's a memory trace on every human being since them, that remembers what we had, and yearns to get it back. That's why even philosophers and scientists who say there is no God, and therefore there is no ultimate meaning in the world, will nonetheless acknowledge that we must create it for ourselves, because human beings can't live without it. You see, we had it, but we lost it. And we lost it through what the Bible calls sin. Because the glory for which we were created, and for which we long, can never be grasped, it can only be given. But sin is wanting to have glory on our own terms, in our own way, without any reference to God. You see it all the time in our culture. We call it self-actualization. Self-realization. Self-determination. It sounds very noble and high-minded, but it is the exalting of man over God. What is it we say in our culture? "It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks of you. The only thing that matters is what you think of yourself." On the one hand, this mindset encourages us not to be defined by other people, which is a good thing. But it does so at the expense of exalting ourselves over God himself, because it says to God, "You may have created me, but you don't define me. I define myself."

We want to manufacture glory for ourselves. But the best we can do is an artificial simulation. Manmade glory is like castles in the sand. The waves come and just dissolve it away. It's not the real thing, and we know it. So we remain hungry for glory, empty in the center, because the glory we strive to get isn't real. And when we're that empty, no matter what we do, no matter how good it is, it will always ultimately be about me. We do it in art or music. Hearing that applause in your ears makes you feel like somebody. We do it in the professional world. The title or the position or the money or the power makes us feel like somebody. We do it with romance, because having someone in your life makes you feel like somebody. You can even be someone like me, someone whose job is to care for other people, like a pastor, a nurse, or a parent. But I will tell you that it is just as easy for me to use helping people as a means of filling that hunger in my gut, because I want people to like me and need me. The problem of humility, and the biggest problem in our lives, is that we're empty of glory. We're hungry in the very center of our being, and our hunger pushes us to strive and strive and strive to fill it. But that leads us to our next point.

The practice of humility – What would our lives look like if we weren't empty? If the problem of humility is that we're hungry for glory, what does the practice of true humility look like? Paul shows us in verse **verses 3-4**, with a series of contrasts. **3** Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. **4** Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Verse 3 shows us both the problem and the answer, and verse 4 shows us what each one looks like practically. In verse 3 the problem is conceit, or empty glory. But the answer is also there: in humility, counting others as more significant than ourselves. But what do each of these things look like practically? Verse 4 shows us. Not looking to our own interests, but looking to the interests of others.

And that word for looking is a very interesting word. It means to focus on something, or to fix your gaze on something. True humility simply means that we stop fixing our gaze on ourselves. It doesn't mean that we have to put ourselves down, or think less of ourselves. Because when we do that, we're still focusing on ourselves. C.S. Lewis put it perfectly in his book *Mere Christianity*: Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call "humble" nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

The practice of humility means that we're freed from the exhausting burden of constantly thinking about ourselves. In practice, that could look like a very simple question that shapes our interactions with others. We could apply it to every area of our lives, but let's just look at two: our speech and our acts. And the question is this: "How can I serve you today?" That is a phenomenally simple, but terrifying question. "Eric, you don't understand. You don't know the people in my life. If I ask that of my kids, or my parents, or my spouse, or my co-workers, or my friends, they will run all over me." Hmm. Maybe they will. Ask it anyway. You want to be freed from constantly thinking about yourself? "How can I serve you today?"

What does that look like in our speech? It means that you think about this question when you're listening to someone. So that when you're talking to someone, you're not looking over their shoulder to see who else is standing around that might be more interesting to talk to. It means that when they're talking about something you've experienced, you don't immediately start talking about your own experience with that subject. You don't make what they're saying about you. It means that you spend time really listening to them, because you're not thinking about what you're going to say as soon as they're

finished talking. It means you find them more interesting than you find yourself. “How can I serve you today?”

And what does that look like in our acts? It means we don't hide from people. It means we pick up the phone when someone calls us, even if we're afraid that it might intrude on our day. It means we actually seek out the people in our lives on a daily basis and we ask them this question: “How can I serve you today?” It means we take a risk, even if we think they might walk all over us and take advantage of us. Are there some situations and circumstances in which it would be unwise, unloving, or even unsafe to do this? Of course, and this doesn't mean that you do it when that's the case. Of course you use wisdom and prudence. But for most of us, the instances when that's going to be the case are going to be pretty rare. For the most part, your life is filled with people and opportunities to practice humility by asking them, “How can I serve you today?” And there's only one way we're really going to be able to do that. Because this is not something we can just flip a switch and all of a sudden we stop focusing on ourselves and we start focusing on others. This requires a whole new mindset. It requires a transformed heart, and there's only one place we can get it. Last point,

The power for humility – In verse 5, Paul says we need a new mindset, and then he gives it to us by showing us Jesus. You know when someone does something you don't understand, sometimes you'll ask them, “What were you thinking?” Jesus' death on the cross was the most incomprehensible act the world has ever seen. But here we actually get to see what was going on in his mind when he did it. And it begins by showing us who Jesus is. **Verse 6:** “though he was in the form of God.” This doesn't mean that Jesus was like God, or that divinity was bestowed upon him at some point, or that he became a god. Without going into the grammar of this phrase, this is saying very strongly that Jesus was God. This is confirmed later in **verses 10-11** where it says that “every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” This is a direct quote from **Isaiah 45:22-23**, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.” This is saying in the strongest possible language that Jesus Christ is YHWH, the covenant God of Israel, the creator of the whole universe.

And before we go any further, it bears taking two minutes to mention something. This is important for us. Not only is this telling us that Jesus Christ is God. This is showing us that from the earliest days of the church, Christians have worshiped him as God. There's a notion out there, it's in the Da Vinci Code, it's all through secular culture, that the church didn't worship Jesus as God until the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. It would have us believe that the divinity of Christ was not part of the early church's belief, that there were lots of legitimate but competing beliefs about Jesus, and that the divinity of Christ was a late development, and a power play by the church to wipe out other competitors. But this passage says, “Au contraire.” Because here you have a letter, indisputably written by the apostle Paul, within the lifetime of people who knew Jesus personally, who knew what he said and what he thought about himself, showing us that in the earliest days of the church Christians worshiped Jesus as God. It's not a late belief. It's part of the essence.

But secondly, this shows us what Jesus thought about being God. Again **verse 6:** “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” Jesus had the glory. He is the glory. If there's one being that has a right to be completely focused on himself, it's Jesus. If there's one being that has a right to be proud, it's Jesus. If there's one being that has the right to say to all of creation, “Worship me,” it's Jesus. And what did he think about that? This is amazing. This is showing us what Jesus thought about his own glory, his own dignity, his own divinity. Imagine this. What do you think about your own dignity and how people ought to treat you? Now multiply that by, oh, infinity. That's

what Jesus Christ has every right to think about himself. And yet this tells us that he didn't consider it important enough to grasp hold of.

James Montgomery Boice tells a story about how some animal dealers go about catching monkeys. They put these shiny beads in jars with narrow mouths, and then they secure them to the ground. And when the monkeys come along and see the beads, they reach in and grab hold of them. And because a closed fist is greater in diameter than an unclenched hand, the only way for the monkeys to get their hands out of the jar is to let go of the beads. But they won't do it. Then the animal dealers come along, and put the monkeys in a cage. And the only way they can get the monkey's hands out of those jars is to break the jars, because they will not let go. And that's what we're like with the artificial glory we've manufactured for ourselves. Our accomplishments. Mighty man. And yet Jesus Christ had the real thing, he had the real glory, and it was his by right. And what did he think about it? "He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." He let go of it.

So Jesus Christ was God, and he had all the glory. There is only one being that truly matters, and it's God. And yet **verses 7-8** say, he "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." We ought to say, "God, how can I serve you today?" But instead we've tried to hijack his glory for ourselves. And what was his response? What would you do if you were God? Not this. "He humbled himself. He focused himself completely on you, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross."

Do you want to know how you can stop focusing so much on your own emptiness, on that hole in the center of your being, on that hunger deep inside of you that you're always striving, striving, striving to fill? The only way is by seeing this. *The hunger that we strive to fill is the glory Jesus died to give.* You have to see Jesus, the God of glory, pouring it all out to serve you on the cross. The hunger that we strive to fill is the glory Jesus died to give. When you see him on the cross, completely focused on you, that heals you, that frees you from having to be so focused on yourself. Because now the glory you've always longed for is yours in Christ. But you have to receive it from him. You have to let go of the beads, pull your hand out of the jar of pride and self-absorption and come to Jesus with open hands. You have to let go of your accomplishments, let go of your goodness, let go of your pride, let go of your life and your anxiety-driven desire to control everything and simply receive from Jesus. And when you do that, when you see the God of the universe serving you on the cross, you can turn around, and say to the people in your life, "How can I serve you today?" Let's pray.