

A NUGGET OF JOYFUL HUMILITY

Philippians 2: 1-11

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Have you ever had to eat a piece of humble pie? Was it a pleasant experience? Was it the result of something you said or something you did? Did it come about because of an embarrassing situation in which you found yourself. More seriously, did it derive from a presumed air of superiority that got the best of you? Whatever the reason, humble pie is an unpleasant pastry that no one really welcomes. It's origin goes all the way back to the Middle Ages. When a king and his nobles went on a hunting trip, they feasted on the finest portions of their kill. The leftovers, the worst cuts of meat and sometimes even the internal organs of the animal were all that was left for the servants. Their portion was described as the "offal." Over the centuries and a multitude of mispronunciations, the word "offal" was gradually transformed. It turned into the word that has come to be known to us as "humble." So, why would I, or for that matter anyone want to speak with you this morning about being humble. Even worse, why would anyone want to deliver a sermon about humility, let alone joyful humility? With such an odious history, humility is certainly no treasure. If anything it should be shunned, not sought after. Let's be honest, who among us wants to be identified with those who are at the end of the line, those who are so to speak—using another well-known idiom—on the "bottom of the totem pole?" Nevertheless, that's exactly what Paul said in the passage of Scripture that was read just a few moments ago. Let's take a look at what he had to say.

Beginning with the first verse in chapter two, we find Paul addressing the Christians in Philippi like a coach speaking to his team before the big game. Just like in one of those movies where the football or basketball coach is giving a rousing pep talk to his players, he starts off by reminding them of who they are. He says, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete" (Philippians 2:1-2a). In a more sports like lingo this is what he is saying, "Ok team, you belong to Christ. You've got His logo on your uniforms. You've been strengthened and trained by His loving support and hopefully you can sense His presence with you right now. What's more, I hope you realize that you're part of His team. As such, you're expected to support and encourage one another. Now make me proud by going out there and putting into practice what I'm about to tell you."

Continuing this sporting illustration, why was Paul addressing the Philippians in such a manner? The answer is found later on in his letter. There were disagreements and perhaps even some ill feelings among the members of the Philippian church. In chapter four he writes, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with

Syntyche to agree with one another in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). Had a competitive spirit arisen among the members of the church, like a football or basketball team where one or more of the players want to be the stars, hogging all the attention and praise? Even with the best of intentions, controversies can arise when, for example, one player says, "Pass me the ball. I'm the only one who can score the winning points." The same kind of thing, of course, can happen in a church. An individual, or a group of individuals rise to places of prominence, but in so doing become consumed by their sense of self-importance. When this kind of a prideful spirit begins to assert itself into the life of a church, the well-being of that congregation will soon be threatened. It appears that just such a thing may have been taking place in Philippi and Paul wanted to address this situation before it got out of hand. So like a good coach, he came up with a plan of action that he knew would bring joy to his own heart and hopefully to the hearts and lives of his beloved friends in that far off church family. His recommendation was essentially a diet of humble pie, or to put it in other words, an opportunity to experience joyful humility.

In verses two through four, he tells us what he had in mind. In fact, it's sort of like a listing of the character qualities of genuine humility. Let me read what Paul writes from a contemporary translation of this passage of Scripture, "Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, working together with one heart and purpose. Don't be selfish: don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, think of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing" (Philippians 2:2-4). That's pretty good advice. In fact, it's really a definition of what true humility is all about. When an individual, or for that matter an entire congregation possesses that kind of an attitude about themselves and one another, that church family will be a happy body of believers.

The same is also true in the realm of business enterprises. My mother shared this story with me years ago. She worked for the Nestle Milk Company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, after she graduated from high school. She was a secretary. When the salesmen arrived at the company offices to hand in their monthly reports, it was always a contentious affair. Each salesman was trying to outdo the other, bragging about all of the cases of evaporated milk he had sold. Those salesmen were loud, argumentative, disruptive and discourteous. The secretaries dreaded their arrival and rejoiced at their departure. Then one day an older gentleman arrived. He was well dressed and obviously of executive status. The secretaries were alarmed. They were fearful that he would be even more demanding and abusive than the salesmen. Perhaps he had arrived to give them their pink slips. Much to their surprise, he was just the opposite. He spoke to each person individually in a gentle and respectful manner. He inquired about how things were going and complimented them on their hard work, promising a financial bonus in the days to come. After he left, they inquired as to who he was. They were told he was the owner. As such he didn't have to throw his weight like some high and mighty boss. Instead, he was acting more like a servant, genuinely interested in

getting to know his employees and meeting their needs. He possessed an air of pleasant, even joyous humility as compared to those obnoxious salesmen.

Personally, I believe that's what Paul had in mind when he referred to Christ as the one whom we should seek to imitate. In verses five through eleven he provides us with a description of Jesus' life and ministry that is just as beautiful and profound today as when he was inspired to write it so long ago. It declares that Christ forsook every opportunity to build Himself up and in fact did just the opposite. He refused to demand equality with His heavenly Father even though it was His rightful possession. Instead He came to earth, became a human being and lived within the confines of that humanity, even though He was the Son of God. As a human being He took upon Himself the role of a lowly servant, even to the point of being obedient unto death, death on a shameful cross. That, my friends, is the definition of true humility. Christ knew who He was, where He had come from and the spiritual resources which He possessed because of His relationship with His heavenly Father. He could, therefore, afford to generously give of Himself. Being a servant didn't diminish His worth. Being abused and humiliated didn't lessen His value. If anything His servanthood was so outstanding, so beneficial to humanity, that it actually produced the opposite effect. Instead of being relegated to insignificance, He became the recipient of honor, glory and boundless authority. That's why Paul could conclude this section of his letter by declaring, "Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). In other words, Christ's humility was and will be amply rewarded.

So what about you and me? What is God's Word saying to us in this passage of Scripture? It's telling us that humility is a very worthwhile character trait that every Christian should possess. For one thing, it keeps us from being too big for our britches. For another it opens the door to restored relationships when we offer a sincere apology for something that we have said or done which was offensive. It also helps us to develop a servant's heart, where meeting the needs of others becomes a desired priority, even when those needs are at times demeaning and repulsive. Finally, genuine, Christ-like humility signals the end of our search for personal significance and acclaim. We don't have to pretend to be anything other than what we truly are, a child of the King.

Eating humble pie may not be something that most people look forward to. Nevertheless, there are three things that we need to always keep in mind, three reasons for being joyfully humble. First, Jesus ate humble pie and we are His disciples. Therefore, we too should expect to receive a serving or two. Second, eating humble pie is good for us. It makes us stronger and better followers of Christ. Finally it prepares us for that glorious and wonderful banquet in heaven. For God's angel in the book of Revelation reminds us, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9).