

## Philippians 2

Building on the primary appeal of the letter to the Philippians which we started last week: “Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ;” today we see Paul narrow in to appeal for community unity and individual humility. He asks his hearers to “make [his] joy complete” by being “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind”.

Along with unity, Paul appeals for humility. Believers are to be characterized not by “selfish ambition or conceit”, but by “humility”. This entails esteeming others and their interests more highly than one’s own concerns. This “humility”, that is “thinking lowly or humbly”, is grounded in Christ’s “humbling” himself to the point of crucifixion. It stands in stark contrast to the honour-seeking that prevailed among Roman aristocrats in society. Paul does not recommend a traditional course of honour – the way of upward mobility and aspiration – but a course of downward mobility: the way of relinquishment and honouring others, seen foremost in the counterintuitive life of Christ, who is ultimately proclaimed – “Lord” of all domains, a title superior to that of the highest Roman aristocrat, even Caesar himself.

Paul calls out individualistic quests for societal status and honour as contrary to the spirit of Christ – and potentially harmful to community. The first four verses of today’s reading form a long, singular sentence (in Greek), making Paul’s appeals to unity and to humility inseparable. In Paul’s mind, humility is a necessary ingredient for community unity, and true humility is measured, not by low self-evaluation, but by demonstrable concern for others.

For Paul, the words: “have this mind among you that also was in Christ Jesus” form a mindset or way of thinking that is critical in ethical behaviour. How we think profoundly influences how we live. Paul invites his hearers to reflect on Jesus Christ and to orient their lives around Christ, who embodies God’s will and work for humanity, and is an example of how we are to live our lives.

Do you remember the '90s? – that glorious decade that gave us: Beanie Babies, Pogs, Beavis and Butthead, and of course ... WWJD or - ‘What would Jesus Do’ bracelets. There was a period of several years — from about 1995 through the end of the decade — when it seemed that everybody was wearing those things: high schoolers, grandparents, professional athletes. The WWJD bracelet trend was kicked off by a youth minister in Michigan. She had the first batch of 300 or so made for kids in her youth group to pass out to their friends.

The idea was a fun and easy way to witness to one’s faith, and to check oneself. After all, keg parties and free sex get rather awkward when you’re wearing something that says “What Would Jesus Do?”. Unfortunately, the spiritual meaning was totally lost on many who wore those bracelets. They became more of a fashion statement than a statement of faith.

Although many people were wearing them, many of the wearers were a faithless bunch, but even for those who were acting inappropriately, sometimes that bracelet still made a difference in their behaviour. Their bad behaviour – running off at the mouth, acting selfishly, being obnoxious or rude, or just downright nasty, would sometimes turn around when they would catch a glimpse of their WWJD bracelet.

There were probably a lot of bad choices that bracelet didn't stop them from making, but there were also numerous times when it did. So maybe the WWJD bracelets worked exactly like they were supposed to.

The question, What would Jesus do?, is really a question about how we should treat others and how we deal with our neighbours. When we take this question seriously, it can completely revolutionize interpersonal relationships and interactions with other people. It's a little harder to be rude or unkind or selfish when you're trying to treat people the way Jesus would treat them.

It's important to apply the question – What Would Jesus Do? – to how we treat others, before we apply it to anything else. How we treat people does affect how they listen to what we say about Jesus and our beliefs. Imagine a physically fit person with a Jesus fish or some other Christian symbol on their bumper takes the last handicap parking space, leaving the amputee with no suitable place to park? How would that inform that person's opinion about Christians?

Apparently, some American evangelicals have been known to leave fake money as tips for their restaurant servers. The server thinks they've been given a twenty-dollar tip. But when they turn the fake bill over, they read: "Disappointed? You won't be if you will let Jesus Christ become the Lord of your life.'For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.' Ask Jesus Christ into your life and you can have peace and joy." Sometimes there are a few more Bible verses on the fake bill.

How likely is that the server to show up in church on their next Sunday off? These are definitely situations where Christians haven't asked, What would Jesus do? Either that, or they have a very warped perception of who Jesus is and what following Jesus' example is all about.

And that makes it all the more difficult to spread the word about Jesus because there are many in the world who've been inconvenienced, abused, or bullied by self-centred Christians. They've been disrespected by rude or thoughtless Christians. They've been told their voices don't matter by Christians who haven't really listened to them. They've been shamed by Christians who judge them but never really see them. Sadly, they've had too many bad or painful experiences with Christians to listen to anything we have to say or offer. And the only way to turn things around is to take this question – What would Jesus do? – and apply it to our encounters, our interactions, and our relationships with others.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us what Jesus would do: "Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves." Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus. Ask yourselves, What would Jesus do? Then Paul tells us exactly what Jesus did, and what God did for Jesus and through Jesus. Jesus is fully God who came to live among us humans.

It's a pretty radical idea – God descending into human flesh. God chooses downward mobility against all expectations of a deity. Those who have spent a lot of time in church are likely used to the idea of God becoming human. It can be the wallpaper of

our faith – all around us and yet just sort of there in the background. Paul calls us to see – again, maybe for the first time – how radical this God is and what that means for our lives.

In the ancient world, a god who was “born in human likeness” was a self-demoting God, hardly the sort of God useful for human life. It’s one thing for Zeus to become human for a day to play tricks, but it’s quite another for the God of the universe to “empty himself taking the form of a slave,” that is, to take on flesh, become fully human, suffer and die. Who needs a God like that? This God doesn’t sound like a “winner”, like the mighty deity who comes to the aid of powerless humans or like a super deity we want on our side. The ancients were unlikely to trust the judgment of a “loser God” who chooses this sort of downward mobility.

In the Roman Empire, dominance, victory, and ascendance signalled power and authority. How is it possible for humility, servitude, submission, even death, to signal power and authority? Yet we are told everything about this God we need to know – that Jesus empties himself, becoming a servant – in order to fully inhabit humanity, to fully incorporate human life into divine life. This God loves and longs for us so much that God enters fully into human life – not putting on a human suit for a day but submitting to all the indignities and joys of human life, including death.

This God does not withhold love until we rise to a divine level, but rather stoops to our level, scoops us up in all our messiness and makes us part of God’s own Life, the Triune Life, where we are healed and saved. And, in a twist of logic, God’s self-demotion into full humanity is the source of Jesus’ exaltation. And it is the source of ours as well.

Our full, messy humanity is the ground on which we kneel to raise up glory to God.

So Jesus didn't take advantage of any privileges he may have had as the Son of God. Instead, Paul says, he emptied himself. Jesus gave himself away for others. Any power or privilege he had as the Son of God, he used for other people's benefit, until he had nothing left. Jesus lived to heal and restore and redeem other people's lives.

Jesus emptied himself by taking the form of a slave. On the night of the Last Supper, the night before he died a humiliating death on the cross, the very One who created human feet out of the dust of the ground, bent down and washed the dust off of human feet with a basin and a towel.

Jesus emptied himself by giving up the riches of heaven and living a fully human life. He experienced all of our limitations—pain and hunger and sadness and shame and death. He came into our reality. He lived among us and got to know us intimately. Jesus doesn't judge us without knowing what it's like to be us. He doesn't tell us how to live without having experienced life on our terms.

And Jesus humbled himself. Humility has as much to do with how we relate to other people as it does how we relate to God. In the book of Micah, it says: "He has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: "to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God". So humbling oneself requires doing justice and embracing faithful love. Again, it is all about how we treat other people.

Doing justice means doing right by the needy and vulnerable. The Hebrew Bible had specific categories of people who needed justice and care — the poor, widows,

orphans, and immigrants. Today we have refugees, single mothers and their children, the homeless, the addict. Humbling oneself like Jesus means that you treat those people how you'd like to be treated if you were in their place.

Faithful love has a specific meaning in scripture. That word means God's special, unbreakable love for his people. To embrace faithful love means that you don't abandon people when they become inconvenient. You keep caring for them, even when they frustrate you. That's what Jesus calls us to do.

Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The creator of life experienced death for us. And still we ask, What would Jesus do? As we see him dying for us, does that mean we have to die for others? Maybe not physically dying, but dying to ourselves, not demanding our own way, not focussing first on our own desires, but on what others need. James writes: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

This is what Paul wanted the Christians in Philippi – and wants us – to understand. Jesus placed what other people needed above his own comfort and desires. He looked out for others, not just for himself. And because Jesus humbled himself in these ways, God exalted him. And Paul says if we do what Jesus did, God will lift us up, too just like he raised Jesus. We will share in Jesus' resurrection, and victory.

But we can see this working out in this life, too. If we treat our relationships, our encounters and interactions with other people like Jesus would — if we're willing to empty ourselves of some hangups and prejudices; if we're meeting people where they're at and

-serving them there; if we're vulnerable and self-giving, instead of being closed-off and suspicious; if we're pursuing justice and embracing steadfast love and walking humbly with God — then we'll see God at work lifting up our church; our families; our workplaces, our neighbourhoods and communities. We will all be lifted up together.

What would Jesus do today? Go, and do just that. We began with the question: What would Jesus do? First, we need to apply this question to how we treat other people. This question needs to guide our encounters and social interactions and our relationships. This is exactly how Paul would have applied this question. Paul used Jesus' example to pull Christians back from selfishness and self-centeredness, and nurtured them toward more open, more generous, more thoughtful ways of living with - and for - others. And Paul adds an incentive: if we humbly follow Jesus' example, God will lift us up just like he did for Jesus.

So asking "What would Jesus do?" is really a social and relational question about our conversations and dealings with other people. Sometimes it's tempting to be selfish. You're at the grocery store, tired and in a hurry, and your cart is full. You see someone with one or two items slowly meandering up to a checkout line and you rush to cut them off. It may seem like an insignificant act, but it's not, because even the small choices we make train our hearts. When that moment comes, ask yourself: What would Jesus do? And you'll know the answer. And whatever that answer is — do it.

Or maybe you're frustrated or hurt by someone. And you want to be right. You want to win the argument. You're tempted to say that one razor-sharp thing you know will cut them down to size. Maybe you even justify it in your own heart and tell yourself, that what

you're about to say is, after all, true. When that moment comes, ask yourself: But would Jesus say that? You know the answer. Do what Jesus would do.

Maybe you're in rush hour traffic, or at work, or school, or with a family member, or online. You're tempted to lose your temper, or to make yourself look better at someone else's expense, or to judge someone you don't even know, or to think the worst of them, or to criticize and make fun. Hopefully, in those moments, you'll hear a voice that asks: Yes, but what would Jesus do? And you'll know the answer. And hopefully that's what you'll do. And you'll be able to do this because in the letter to the Philippians, Paul said: God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes. In those moments, you can absolutely do what Jesus would do, because God will give you thicker skin and a softer heart. God will enable and empower you.

Imagine a church that does what Jesus would do and lives out the answer in our social interactions and all of our relationships beginning with ourselves and this church family. We'll all feel so much safer and freer, beginning right here in our church family because we can be confident that we won't be criticized or put down just for being who we are. That will create space for us to be open and honest, with ourselves and each other. We'll cultivate and nurture deeper, fuller, more supportive relationships within this church family.

Now, we need to understand that asking "What would Jesus do?" won't magically solve every problem. We will still wrestle with sins and all kinds of struggles in our lives. We'll still have bad days, sad days, and selfish days. Those are all just part of the human experience.

What does this mean for how we live? This goes-against-the-grain-God sets the pattern for our lives. Against the cultural narratives that tell us winning is everything, those who follow Jesus take on a downward mobility attitude about life. We can “have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” being humbled by the same love that was in Christ Jesus. And, equally counter-cultural, it is in our humbling that we become fully and deeply human “to the glory of God the Father”. So let us go from here with a renewed commitment to live in, to live out, and to live by this question: What would Jesus do?

Amen.