

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(July 26, 2020)

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Sermon manuscript

Imitation Authenticity

(Philippians 2:1-11)

Study #4

Sermon series: It's All About Jesus

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi)

Introduction: Finding God...

In one of his excellent books (one of his best, Disappointment with God), Philip Yancey imagines a roving reporter traveling through time, looking for God.

The reporter's first stop is the Sinai Peninsula, around 1,500 B.C. He approaches an ancient Hebrew, sticks a microphone in his face and asks, *"Where can I find God? What is He like?"*

The man, recently delivered from Egyptian bondage, points to a smoking mountain, and says, *"God is over there. Don't go near that mountain or you'll die. God is unapproachable!"*

The scene changes. Now, our reporter is on the streets of Jerusalem, a few hundred years later, during the reign of the great Jewish kings.

Notebook in hand, he finds a man on the street and asks him the same questions, *"Where might I find God? What kind of a God is Israel's God?"*

The man reverently points to Solomon's temple.

"There, in the Holy of Holies is where God is. He is holy. He is inaccessible except by the priests."

The third scene takes us to Palestine in the time of Christ. A woman runs past our reporter. He hollers out to her as she hurries by, and asks her what he's asked others, *"What is God like? Where is He?"*

The woman's response is immediate. *"Jesus of Nazareth! He heals the sick, casts out demons, raises the dead. His teachings are amazing. He is filled with compassion. Jesus is what God is like."*

Final scene. 2020, San Antonio. Our ace reporter walks toward a group of twenty-somethings drinking coffee at The Cracked Mug in Old Town Helotes. He asks them his questions - *"Where can I find God? What's He like?"*

I can't wait to tell you what they said, and we'll listen to their answer in a few minutes. But first, we're going to turn again to the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in the city of Philippi.

Last Sunday, we listened as Paul made the case that life = Christ. As our memory verse these days says, **[Philippians 1:21] For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.** Living, we get a taste of Jesus. Dying, we get the full banquet.

Now, having updated his Philippian friends about his house arrest situation in Rome and how he is awaiting trial before Caesar, Paul turns His attention to what he longs to see them experience, together, as they live for Jesus, together. This is Paul's vision of life in the church, the Body of Christ.

God-Honoring Unity in the Church (vv. 1-4)

What A LIFE We Have in Jesus. (v. 1)

The certainty of our blessings in Christ

[2:1] Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion...

“If” at the beginning of a sentence usually indicates *iffyness*, as in, “*If we ever have a white Christmas here in San Antonio, then we’ll have a lot of very surprised and happy people.*”¹

So, by the fact that what I just read has four “ifs”, we might think that Paul is being wildly speculative - and we would be wrong.

Here, “**If**” should be rendered “**Since**”:²

There is no uncertainty in this verse. There is no ambiguity. Paul is simply stating facts that are true about life in Christ.

First, in Jesus we find encouragement.

The “facts of life” in Christ

There is encouragement in Christ (v. 1a)

When the car won’t start or the A/C glitches on a July San Antonio day (Harrisons...), when the kids are cranky and the joints are creaky, and when the day holds more promise for tension than relief, we remember Jesus and find encouragement.³

Of course, remembering Jesus doesn’t start the car, relieve achy joints, or make the kids happy.

¹ Based on weather data accumulated over the last century and more, that there has never been a white Christmas in San Antonio.

² There are four different ways that a writer could make a conditional (“if... then”) statement in the Greek language of the first century (the language in which the New Testament was written). These different types of conditional sentences range in meaning from the wildly hypothetical to the rock solid certain. The grammatical form of the condition in verse 1 is of the “rock solid certain” type. It ASSUMES the truth of the statement in the first part of the sentence - meaning that the second part (found in verses 2-4) will follow as a matter of course. In Greek, this is called a first-class conditional.

³ The Greek word that we translate “*encouragement*” literally means “called alongside to help.” We receive help and find strength and courage to press on, even in the most DIScouraging circumstances, because of our relationship with the living Lord Jesus.

But we are encouraged when we gain the eternal perspective that remembering Jesus provides. It is well with our souls because we know that we are secure in the care of a loving God.

There is the consolation of love in Christ (v. 1b)

Then, we breathe a sigh of relief at the thought that we are not condemned for our sins. Jesus, the One in whom we have believed, died, and rose again. Jesus loves us. We are forgiven.⁴

There is the fellowship of the Spirit in Christ (v. 1c)

Plus, the Holy Spirit is always present with us. He has pledged to eternally indwell us. We are never alone.

There is affection and compassion in Christ (v. 1d)

Finally, affection and compassion always flow from God to you.

The word we translate *affection* comes from the same Greek word that is used for “guts” and carries with it the idea of someone being “all churned up” on the inside over the plight of somebody else.

Compassion pictures the tender feelings of a mother for her child, or of a loving father toward his children.

Paul is telling us that God the Son feels that way about us, His redeemed people. Even in the midst of your suffering and your most difficult trauma, Jesus knows and Jesus cares.

Philippians 2:1 is not a collection of dreamy platitudes. They are rock-solid certainties.

AT ALL TIMES it is encouraging to remember that we are in Christ.
AT ALL TIMES love flows to us from Christ.

⁴ There are several Greek words that we translate with the word “love” in the New Testament. The word Paul used here is the word that came to have a distinctively Christian meaning: *agape*. The word signifies God’s unconditional love, a love most clearly seen on the cross when Jesus died for your sins and for mine.

AT ALL TIMES, the Holy Spirit is with us.
AT ALL TIMES God views us with deep affection and compassion.

Here, Paul is telling us that SINCE life in Christ is like this (v. 1), then life with each other in the church should look like this. (vv. 2-4)⁵

The first mark of the church, as it is meant to be, is unity.

What A Life We SHOULD Have - Together. (vv. 2-4)

Maintaining unity (v. 2)

[2] make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

Puzzles are fun for all ages, but puzzles get more complex for advanced puzzlers.

While our two-year-old granddaughter in Waco puts together very simple puzzles, adults may work for weeks on a puzzle with a thousand pieces.⁶

At the end of putting together a very complex puzzle making up a stunning nature image, you sit back and admire the beauty. The beauty of the puzzle is the completed picture created by all the different pieces contributing to the overall image.

That's the kind of unity Paul is describing. Not sameness or uniformity or unanimity or cookie cutter Christianity. That's nothing any of us want to be a part of.

The beauty of the church is lived out when it is a collection of people with different shades of skin and ages and stations of life, different perspectives, and opinions, all worshiping and serving Jesus.

⁵ As is common in the New Testament, the motivating force that is to drive us to love is the grace and love we have already received from God.

⁶ Back in the 1960's, I remember my grandmother completing a puzzle called "Little Red Riding Hood's Hood" - yep, a one-thousand-piece red puzzle. But that image doesn't quite get at what Paul is describing in Philippians 2.

In the church, we have each received encouragement, comfort, love, and care from God. We live under the lordship of Jesus and in submission to the New Testament's commands.

We pursue unity with each other, celebrating both our diversity and our commonalities in Christ. The result is stunning beauty.

A church (an *ekklesia*) where there is love and acceptance AND great diversity is exactly where we want to be.

Unity is to be the first mark of our church. Paul lists a second - servanthood - beginning with a focus on the negative.

Choosing humble servanthood (vv. 3-4)

Stage One - the negative (v. 3a)

[3a] Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit...

Acting out of self-interest, I put on a hat when it is cold outside (ah, how delightful it would be to be cold...). I exercise for my health. I order food I like when I go to a restaurant. None of that is selfish.

I am being selfish, though, when I do something on my behalf at your expense.

If I am cold and put on YOUR hat before I go outside, that is selfish. When I take credit for work that you have done, that is selfish. When I insist that you perform some service that will hurt you but benefit me, that is selfish.

So, no selfishness allowed as we interact with each other. Another way to say this is "no empty conceit." Empty conceit involves following an agenda that furthers my interests to the harm of yours.

Unity and community don't flourish in the presence of selfishness and empty conceit.

That's the negative. Now for the positive.

Stage Two - the positive (vv. 3b-4)

[3b]...but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves. [4] Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Paul assumes that we will each look out for our own personal interests. And that's not a problem. He calls us all, though, to *also* look out for the interests of others.

That's how a good business, a good school, and a good family thrives. It is also how an extremely diverse church fellowship thrives.

So, to you who are members of this church family, this is the way life is to be in this church. Mutual care and concern. We are each our brother's or our sister's keeper.

Stop and let that sink in a minute and consider what the implications for you might be if you owned the idea that people in your Care Group, youth group, ABF, Bible study or worship service are worthy of your care and concern. This is your Jesus family.

Then, with an abruptness that is abrupt even for Paul, he transitions from the theme of church to the Lord of the church.⁷

Paul wants you and me to adopt a certain way of thinking and a certain way of living (vv. 2-4) that was modeled by our Savior. He's urging us to imitate "the Jesus way."

The Roller-Coaster Ride of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 5-11)

Imitation - the Sincerest Form of Flattery/Worship

[5] Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus

⁷ Philippians 2:6-11 is regarded as one of the most significant seven-verse sections in the New Testament related to the person and work of Jesus. The form of the passage is almost poetic, and it is thought that the passage was used in early church worship. It is referred to as "The Christ Hymn".

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then a lot of foods today are very sincere flatterers.

Beyond beef (made from plant-based ingredients) imitates cow meat and *chreese* (derived from nutritional yeast) imitates cheese.

Imitation coffees come from grains and of course, there is margarine - an imitation butter that Kathy's Ohio dairy farmer grandfather, with no attempt to hide his contempt, called "skid grease".

Athletes imitate the pros, hoping to grow into their heroes' shoes. And we who have been saved by Jesus are called to an authentic faith that consists of nothing but imitating Him.

Here's how we are to imitate Him.

Downward Mobility - God's Way (vv. 6-8)

To hold and not to grasp (v. 6)

[6] who, although He existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped⁸

Jesus existed in the form of God (v. 6a)

When we say that Jesus "*existed in the form of God,*" we are saying that the Lord Jesus Christ was, in His essence, God.

In the Gospel accounts - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John - we read about some people who understood that this was Jesus' own claim.

For instance, there was that time when Jesus was speaking with some of His fellow Jews. What He said infuriated them and prompted them to accuse Him of blasphemy and to try and kill Him.

He looked them square in the face, and said, ***[John 8:58]... "Before Abraham was born, I AM."***

⁸ The actual words denote an act of seizing, as in robbery.

Nobody missed what He was saying. He was claiming to be Jehovah / Yahweh of the Old Testament, God in the flesh.⁹

Sometimes we hear, "*Jesus never actually claimed to be God. That was just what His disciples said about Him.*" Or, "*The doctrine of Jesus' deity was something made up by the early church.*"

Nope. Jesus did claim repeatedly to be God.¹⁰

And knowing what we know about God - holy, majestic, all-powerful, sovereign - we might expect that the Jesus we read about in the Gospels would be portrayed as a sovereign and majestic ruler.

But that is not the picture we get of Jesus from the Gospels. And what Jesus did with His authority and with His sovereign majesty is not what normal people normally do with power.

Jesus did not grasp at His Deity (v. 6b)

He did not grasp at it. Jesus was so secure in who He was (the Son of God) that He did not need to cling to it as if it might be lost.

No one could take His place as the Son of God. You don't aspire to be God. You either are, or you're not.

He wasn't like that insecure boss or political leader who feels the need to assert authority. Jesus wasn't like the leader in a church or in a home who has something to prove.

⁹ In fact, the argument of the New Testament throughout is that Jesus is God. In John 10:30, He said, "***I and the Father are One.***" In John 5:18, we read, "***For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.***" In Matthew 26:63-65, Jesus says, "***You shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.***"⁹ - a clear claim to be God.

¹⁰ And there is other corroborating evidence of the Deity of Christ. Consider the virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18ff; Luke 2:1-7), His eternal existence (John 1:1-14), and the historical record of His many miracles.

Christ's deity and authority were intrinsic to who He was. They couldn't be lost. There was no need for Him to grasp at that which was His by right as He traveled from heaven's glories into the muck of human experience on earth.

Self-Emptying (v. 7)

[7] but emptied¹¹ Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men

This is a famous verse and some who read it think that Paul is saying that Jesus emptied Himself of deity.

That would have been news to Jesus because He did things only God could have done - gave sight to the blind, cleansed lepers, raised the dead - and He claimed to be God while He walked the earth.

No, Jesus did not empty Himself of deity. Of what, then, did He empty Himself?

He emptied Himself of the prerogatives of freely exercising the powers of deity.¹² He chose to not use the benefits of equality with God He could have used.

When He left heaven, He took upon Himself the limitations of time and space and surrendered His rights to omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence.

How un-American!

There are few things to which we cling more tenaciously than we do to our personal rights. In the USA, we famously believe in certain unalienable rights, given to us by God.

¹¹ Even the translation "emptied" is not helpful. "Veiled" would be better.

¹² One of my favorite hymns is one written by Charles Wesley, *And Can It Be*, (1738) One of the stanzas, though contains an unfortunate line.

*He left His Father's throne above, so free, so infinite His grace
Emptied Himself of all but love
and bled for Adam's helpless race."*

But Jesus did not empty Himself of all but love.

We have freedom of speech and of the press, freedom to keep and to bear arms, to practice our religion, to a speedy and public trial, and more. Our rights are spelled out in the Bill of Rights, an addition to our Constitution, to which we turn when our rights are threatened.

But Jesus - rightfully God - did not insist that He benefit from the fact that He was God. What He might have seized, He relinquished.

He humbled Himself to the point of enduring the normal sufferings of humanity. Beyond that, He chose to endure the abnormal sufferings of humanity.

The quickest road I know to cluster headaches or to a migraine is to try to envision the descent of the Son of God to earth, and the fusing of divinity with humanity.¹³

But here goes. Here's Christmas in July for you.

At birth, the Son of God instantly breathed in cold night air, sniffed the smell of the barnyard, and felt the scratch of hay.

Because of His supposed illegitimate birth, Jesus would have known the hurt of scorn early in life.

His life was full of experiences that were characteristically human. He possessed a human body and had human needs, hungers and appetites, pains, sorrows, and joys.

It was quite a step down to become human. But the downward spiral continued past simply being born a man. In His life as a man, He descended to the lowest level of society - the level of a servant.¹⁴

¹³ As great a theologian as J.I. Packer writes, "*The incarnation is the hardest of all biblical miracles to believe.*" The Athanasian Creed from the early church state, "*Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man... perfect God, and perfect man...who although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ; one not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God.*"

¹⁴ Here, again, we find the word "form" (*morphe*), which indicates perfect congruity with Jesus' essential nature and that of a human servant.

One of the best-known examples of Jesus serving is found in John 13. It is the record of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples on the night before He died.

That incident also pictures the story of His downward mobility.

[John 13:2] During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, [3] Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, [4] got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. [5] Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

The central message of this scene is that the One washing the dirt and grime from the feet of twelve grown men was God in the flesh.

Jesus didn't move from heaven to earth so that He could be known as the world's greatest and wisest ruler, or so that He could boss people around.

He moved from glory downward so that He could become the world's most effective Servant.

To the ladder's bottom rung (v. 8)

[8] Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Philippians 2 takes us on a quick trip from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, from the cradle to the cross.¹⁵ Watch the progression:

He **began** by coming to earth, **continued** by serving, **concluded** by submitting to death, and **emphasized** by the cruel death of a cross the extent of His self-humbling love.

¹⁵ Crucifixion meant to the Romans that Jesus died as the lowest class of slave; to the Jews, that He died under the curse and condemnation of God.

Paul has now led us from Christ's eternal home in heaven to the darkness of His death on an earthly cross.

But the passage doesn't end there. In the very next breath, Paul traces Jesus' journey back up the ladder, from the bottom rung, to the highest height.

The Upwardly Mobile Jesus - God's Way. (vv. 9-11)

Jesus - Name Above all Names. (v. 9)

[9] For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name

You may not have ever thought about this, but Paul is telling us that Christ went back to heaven after the resurrection with more glory than He had when He came to earth in the first place.

He returned to heaven with the majesty of deity, co-mingled with the glory of an undiminished, sinless humanity.

And, as a result of His obedience, God the Father has now graced the Son with an exalted name. But don't look for some unpronounceable, heavenly name. The Name is still Jesus.¹⁶

Jesus was the Name of His humble, earthly life. And God has now vested the name of Jesus with new significance. It is the name of His exaltation.

There is power behind the titles Mayor, Governor, President, and King. Having a "**Name that is above all names**" speaks of a position of absolute authority.

Jesus - worshipped by all creation (vv. 10-11)

[10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth...

¹⁶ The immediate thought that comes to one when reading these words is that of the ineffable name for God "YAHWEH."

Bowing is a physical way to show worship. When He came to earth as a baby, not many recognized Jesus for who He really was. Not many bowed before Him. Some shepherds at the stables; sometime later, some wise men from the east.

Very few bowed throughout His life and ministry. At the end, while He hung on the cross, nobody bowed, except in mockery.

But, one day, things will be different.

One day, Jesus will receive His due and everyone will declare His worth. One day, **[11]...every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**¹⁷

The sovereignty which was His for the taking, but which He refused to grasp while He was on earth; the sovereignty which the devil offered Him (Matthew 4) but He rejected, will in the end be freely given to Him by the Father.

Conclusion:

If a roving reporter asked people in different eras of human history, "*Where can I find God? What is God like*", he would get different answers from the different ages.

Someone in Moses' day would point to Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were given. In Solomon's day, the Temple would be the focal point for learning about and finding God. In the first century, the Lord Jesus Himself provided the best answer to the questions.

So, what about 2020? What would those young adults drinking coffee at The Cracked Mug tell us? Where can we find God?

¹⁷ "**LORD**" This is Jesus' most august title. And, for the past 2,000 years, the confessional slogan of the church has rightly been, "**Jesus Christ is LORD.**"

It is God's greatest passion that the reporter asking the questions to those twenty-somethings would hear, *"We found God at church. We discovered God's love and acceptance in a community of Christians."*

The church is "the body of Christ" - the visible presence of God on earth.

You and I are differently shaped puzzle pieces who have come together to worship and serve and follow Jesus. Putting us together is a very complex process. But, when it happens, the result is stunning beauty.

Together, we imagine Jesus for a watching world. Together, we display God to a watching world.

We become all of that when we each imitate Jesus. We are at our healthiest when we are imitating Him who willingly moved from heaven to earth to serve us.

The church becomes the visible presence of God to those on the outside when we on the inside imitate Him who emptied Himself to bring us to God.

He is the Lord. This Lord "emptied" Himself to serve. We best imitate Him when we empty ourselves to serve each other in His Name.

When we love well, we give outsiders a snapshot of what God is like. They can see us imitating Jesus and get a taste of what God is like.