

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 17, 2023)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

CHRISTMAS, 2023

Downward Mobility

(Philippians 2:5-8)

Introduction: A metaphor for our time...

Given a choice, we would all probably choose upward mobility rather than the other way. As Americans, we've been conditioned to expect an upwardly mobile life.

We "graduate" from Preschool and move on to Kindergarten, Elementary School, Middle School, and High School.

- When we graduate from High School, we'll go on to learn a trade or to attend college.
- We expect to begin with odd summer jobs, launch a career and then move up the ladder to better and better jobs.
- We move from our first rental to a "starter" home to a larger home.

You get the idea. Upward mobility.

These days, many Americans are waking from that dream to the harsher reality of downward mobility. There is evidence everywhere that the trend toward downward mobility is on the rise.

Rising interest rates, inflation, and a challenging job market are making downward, not upward mobility, the norm for lots of people.

And downward mobility is nowhere near as much fun as upward mobility.

The downwardly mobile person or family faces new limitations, a different standard of living, and, likely, more work.

Thinking about all of this leads to a consideration of Christmas, because Jesus chose to travel a downwardly mobile path.

Today, we're exploring a passage from the Bible that traces Jesus' downwardly mobile journey. It's not linked to His birth narratives, as they appear in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.¹

Instead, we find our Christmas passage in the second chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Philippi.

Orienting to Philippians

Philippians is one of Paul's most delightful letters. He loved the people in this church, and they loved him. He wanted them to flourish in their relationship with God.

He urged them: ***[1:27] conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.***

He also told them that they were to see to it that love flowed freely in the church.

[2:1] Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, [2] make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. [3] Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility consider 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.

¹ Nor are we going to turn to John's Gospel, where we read about "*the Word.*" John writes, ***[1:14] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; and we saw His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.***

That's a beautiful description of life in Jesus' church. It's also a tall order. Dealing with each other unselfishly, lovingly, and with humility is a challenge. But this is the way life is to be here, together.

Then, as if to answer an unspoken question, like, "*How do I do THAT?!*" - Paul points us to Jesus. He guides us to "The Jesus Way."

Imitate Jesus (2:5)

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

Imitation is, truly, the sincerest form of flattery. And we are to imitate Jesus.

When I'm trying a new car repair or home improvement project, I go to YouTube and imitate the experts.

Popular cooking shows let the rest of us imitate the best chefs. And the same thing happens with exercise videos and other "how-to" shows. They give us role models.

Here, Paul holds up Jesus as our role model if we aspire to love. And he doesn't point to Jesus' words or actions. He points to Jesus' attitude. We are to imitate Jesus' whole approach to life.

But, here at the outset, I'll issue a warning.

Jesus' attitude was very un-American. He embraced downward mobility. And the degree of descent into downward mobility Jesus chose was breathtaking.

Before we see how low He was willing to go, let's consider the height from which He started off.

Downward Mobility (2:6-8)

Jesus - No Grasping! (v. 6)

Jesus was truly and fully God (v. 6a)

[6a]...HE already EXISTED IN THE FORM² OF GOD...

That's a mouthful. Paul wants us to understand that at the most basic level, Jesus was - and is - God.

This has been the common confession of Christians for two thousand years. We believe that the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, raised in Galilee, and killed in Jerusalem was...God.³

Let that sink in. The Bible records a few of those times when people let Jesus' claim to deity "sink in."

For instance, this past week I was reading in John's Gospel and came to one passage where Jesus made a claim to deity.

The Jewish rulers got it, were offended, and accused Him of blasphemy.⁴

Jesus didn't retract or back down. He dug in and ramped up the intensity. He said, ***[John 8:58] "Before Abraham was born, I AM."***

And no one missed what He was saying. Jesus was claiming to be the Jehovah of the Old Testament, in the flesh!⁵

John then tells us, ***[58:59] Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and left the temple grounds.***⁶

PAUSING TO LET THIS SINK IN...

² The word "**form**" is a crucial term here.² "**Form**" stresses the inner essence of something - what it REALLY is.

³ This is a reference to both the state the Son had as He existed in eternity past (God), and to the nature of the historical Jesus Christ.

⁴ Even though they had watched Him repeatedly validate that claim by miracles.

⁵ The argument of the New Testament is that Jesus is God. He said, ***[John 10:30] "I and the Father are One."*** In a clear claim to be God, Jesus said, ***[Matthew 26:64] "...you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."***

⁶ The significance of "**son**" in the Ancient Near Eastern culture denoted not subordination, but equality and identity of nature.

The Jews of Jesus' day were opposed to His claim to be God, and there are many who do not believe in His deity today.

I understand anyone who struggles with Jesus' claim to be God. It's quite the claim.

But if you don't believe that He is God, you should know that the best records of His life we have (the four Gospels) tell us that He did claim to be God. So, let's at least take that claim seriously.

Was He God, in the flesh? He either was or He wasn't. And if claimed to be God and was NOT God, well, that is a problem.

If Jesus was not God and knew that He wasn't God when He made the claim, He's a liar. Worse than that, He was a fool, because He died for His false claims. Worst of all, He told His followers to place their eternal destinies in His care.

THAT makes Him responsible for the eternal deaths of countless millions of Christians who have wrongly believed in Him.

Or maybe Jesus claimed to be God and thought He really was God...but wasn't God. That's a problem on a whole different level. THAT would be the ultimate in self-delusion.

It is simply impossible to say about Jesus' claims to be God, "Well, at least He was a good, moral teacher."

Wrong!

Good, moral teachers don't go around saying that they are God. They don't offer forgiveness of sins. And they don't invite others to trust them for eternal life in vain.⁷

Is Jesus God in the flesh?

⁷ In the words of C.S. Lewis, "You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a good moral teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to."

If He is not, He can be rejected as a liar or as delusional. If He is, then He is the central Person with whom we each have to deal.

For myself, after a lifetime of studying His words and His works, and a lifetime of finding Him faithful, I believe that Jesus was God incarnate.

And, if before today, you haven't considered Jesus' claim to be God, look at the evidence. I think you'll come to the same conclusion I have. There has never been anyone like Jesus. And He, the God-man, is uniquely worthy of your trust.

Now, we would think that the fact of Jesus' deity would carry with it some predictable implications.

God is sovereign. God is powerful. God is majestic. Therefore, we would assume that the life of Jesus will be marked with the trappings of majesty. He will be marked by authority.

American Express tells us, "Membership has its privileges." Doesn't it follow that deity will have its privileges?

So, we would think. So, we would be wrong. Because "majestic" is not the picture the Bible gives us of Jesus of Nazareth.

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

[2:6b]...did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped⁸

Jesus was completely secure in who He was. He was the unique Son of God. And it was not as if someone could take His place as God.

Jesus had not aspired to be God, didn't make it His aim to be God.

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

You don't work hard to be God. You either are God or you are not. And Jesus was God. There was no need for Him to grasp at deity as if it might have been lost.

So often today, we see people grasping at power and position and prominence.

Government leaders may stoop to stunning depths to gain or to keep power. Church leaders may be tempted to do the same. Same for business leaders and leaders of families. Power and powerful positions can be lost. Powerful people all know that.

But Jesus' power and authority could not be lost. He could never become anything less than God.

How, then, did Jesus deal with having more authority than anyone else in the world? Here's how. He did not "*grasp*" at that which was His by right to enjoy.

Having taken the posture of release, He continued the descent, moving from heaven to the messiness of earth. Or, as Paul puts it...

Jesus - Self-Emptying (v. 7)

Jesus emptied Himself (v. 7a)

[7] but emptied⁹ Himself...

Now, what do those words, "**emptied Himself**" mean?¹⁰

⁹ The translation "*emptied*" is not helpful. "*Veiled*" might be better.

¹⁰ That phrase brings to mind one of my favorite hymns, And Can It Be, (Charles Wesley, 1738). One stanza pictures our redemption with beautiful imagery.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and death's dark night.

Thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke; the dungeon flamed with light.

My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed Thee!

Later in the hymn, Wesley included words I wish he hadn't.

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.

Did Jesus empty Himself of everything except love? Was the only thing left after He left heaven, love? No!

He did NOT empty Himself of Deity

Some, in reading this, conclude that when Jesus was born, He was emptied of deity.

That is, that in the descent from heaven to earth, the Son of God lost the essential "form" of God, and became something other than, and something less than, God.

But the idea that Jesus emptied Himself of deity runs counter to His own claims AND to the record of His life. Plus, it begs the question, "*How can God no longer be God?*"

Jesus claimed to be God and backed up the claim by doing things that only God can do - calming a storm at sea, giving sight to the blind, cleansing lepers, raising the dead.

No, Jesus did not empty Himself of Deity. So, of what did Jesus empty Himself?

He emptied Himself of the prerogatives of Deity

He emptied Himself of the benefits and of the prerogatives of deity. While He was on the earth Jesus laid aside:

- **omnipresence** and took upon Himself the limitations of time and space.
- **omniscience** and chose to limit His knowledge.
- **omnipotence** and willingly limited His power.

The rights due Him for being God were all His. But during the His thirty three years of life with us, He didn't exercise those rights.¹¹

How un-American.

¹¹ Jesus exercised voluntary non-use of some of His attributes of Deity some of the time while He was on earth. He did not empty Himself of Deity.

The prevailing winds of our own times deify “personal rights.” There seems to be nothing so sacred as the exercise of the rights we as individuals believe are ours.

Yet during the years that He walked this earth, Jesus did not insist that He benefit from the fact that He was God.

What He might have seized, He relinquished. What He could have grasped, He released. And, while remaining God, He voluntarily submitted to the limitations of being born human.

And that is how we turn to Philippians and find ourselves thinking about Christmas.

Jesus took the form of something other than God (v. 7b)

[7b]... taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men

Down to the level of humanity

The quickest road I know to a headache is to think about the descent of God to earth, and the fusing of divinity with humanity.¹²

As great a theologian as J.I. Packer wrote, “*The incarnation is the hardest of all biblical miracles to believe.*”

Yes, it’s tough to imagine. But it is what happened when Jesus was born at Bethlehem.

And what the Son of God had experienced from all eternity with His Father in heaven was nowhere to be found on earth. There was also no comparison between what He found on earth and what had always been His in heaven.

¹² The Athanasian Creed from the early church states, “*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.*”

At birth, He breathed in the cold night air, smelled the smell of the barn, and felt the scratch of hay in His makeshift cradle.

Early in life, He would have experienced scorn because of the circumstances surrounding His birth. And He would have tasted all the hardships of growing up in a poor family in ancient Palestine.

But Jesus’ downward mobility continued past simply being lowly born. In His life as a man, He descended to the lowest level of society - the level of a servant.¹³

Down to the level of servant

Read through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and you’ll see Jesus portrayed as the consummate Servant.

We could draw on a vast store of stories from the Gospels to show that he “***took the form of a bond-servant,***” but one stands out.

On the night of His betrayal, John describes this scene.

[John 13:2] And 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 handed all things over to Him, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, [4] got up from supper and laid His outer garments aside; and He took a towel and tied it around Himself. [5] Then He poured water into the basin, and began washing the disciples’ feet and wiping them with the towel which He had tied around Himself.

Yes, that happened. Jesus washed the grit and grime from the filthy feet of twelve grown men.

But what happened there in the upper room in Jerusalem is a picture. It is a picture of the journey Jesus took when He emptied Himself of the rights of being God, laid aside His glory, and became one of us to serve all of us.

¹³ Here, again, we find the word “form” (*morphe*), which indicates perfect congruity with Jesus’ essential nature and that of a human servant.

Jesus didn't move from heaven to earth so that He could boss people around. He moved from glory down so that He could become the world's greatest Servant.

Here's Jesus giving His life's purpose statement: ***[Mark 10:45] "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."***

The whole point of the birth of Jesus was servanthood.

So, He humbled Himself to the point of enduring the normal sufferings of mortal man. Then, He also chose to endure the abnormal sufferings of mortal man as a Servant.¹⁴

And Jesus' downward mobility continued.

Jesus - On 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.

The second chapter of Philippians takes us on a quick trip from the throne room of heaven to earth's slave's quarters.

- He **began** humbly, coming from heaven to earth.
- He **continued** humbling Himself by serving.
- He **concluded** humbly, by submitting to death on a cross.¹⁵

Now, all of us will die. Nobody gets out of this life alive, and death is the one certainty for all of us.

But Jesus died in a way that none of us will. His death was a death of shame, a death of a curse, a death involving the most terrible suffering imaginable.¹⁶

¹⁴ We see the final descent of Jesus in verse 8. Bible scholar A.T. Robertson calls these verses "the ultimate description of Jesus' descent from the throne of God to the bottom rung of the human ladder."

¹⁵ I use the term "humble" not in the sense that Jesus was personally humiliated, but in the objective sense in which He lowered Himself.

The Roman Empire reserved this type of capital punishment for the worst non-Roman criminals.¹⁷ It was so gruesome that crucifixion wasn't even mentioned in polite company.

So, according to the Romans, Jesus died as a criminal. According to the Jews, He died under God's curse.

The death of Jesus on the cross marked the lower limit of His downwardly mobile journey as a Servant. But we see the power and the wisdom of God at work in the cross because it was by the cross that His death provided for the salvation of sinners.

The prophet Isaiah wrote six hundred years before Jesus' birth. Listen to these words from Isaiah which look ahead to the cross.

[53:4] However, it was our sicknesses that He Himself bore, And our pains that He carried; Yet we ourselves assumed that He had been afflicted, Struck down by God and humiliated. [5] But He was pierced for our offences, He was crushed for our wrongdoings; The punishment for our well-being was laid upon Him, And by His wounds we are healed. [6] All of us, like sheep, have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the wrongdoing of us all To fall on Him.

Today we have traveled from the highest height to the deepest depth. Paul has led us from Jesus' starting point in heaven, to the darkness of death on a cross.

And he isn't finished. In the very next breath, we see Jesus soaring back up the ladder, from the bottom rung to the highest height!

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

¹⁶ "Crucifixion" - the word from which we get our word *excruciating*.

¹⁷ Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion.

[9] For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name [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, [11] and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The sovereignty, which was His for the taking, but which He refused to grasp while He was on earth, will in the end be given to Him by the Father.

There is no more regal title you can give to Jesus than **“LORD.”** And for the past 2,000 years, the confessional slogan of the church has been, **“Jesus is LORD.”**

And, as Lord, He has the power to offer eternal life to anyone who simply believes in Him.

Conclusion:

Among the books in my study, there are a few that I return to again and again. One of those is a book by David Prior titled Jesus and Power.¹⁸

As you might expect, the book highlights the power of Jesus, as we have done this morning. Prior affirms what the Bible does, that Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

The book’s funniest chapter traces Jesus’ relationship with powerful people of His day, as He bested them time after time.

But I go back to the book so often because of the author’s insightful reflections on Jesus’ own use of power, rather Jesus’ non-use of the power the Father gave Him.

Power is dangerous. We’ve all heard that. Power corrupts. And it’s always been that way.

Two thousand years ago, the Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote, *“The lust for power...influences the heart more than any other passion.”*

In the 1800’s, the German philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche said, *“Wherever I found a living creature, I found the unconditioned will to...overpower.”*¹⁹

We see this *“unconditioned will to overpower”* at work every time we check out news feeds.

But it isn’t necessary to check out the news feeds to see it. We don’t have to look to heads of state, government officials or leaders of business to see power doing its corrupting work.

We can look in the mirror.

Take me, for example. When I look in the mirror, I see someone who is familiar with the temptation to want power over the things that go on in his personal world.

For one thing, I’d like the power to make sure that things go my way in my neighborhood.

I want one neighbor to turn off his floodlights at night, another to clean up his property, and one neighborhood business to be more neighborly.

Then, I know the temptation to want power here at church.

That desire (or *“attitude”* borrowing from Paul in Philippians 2:5) can manifest itself in a subtle shift from a passion to follow Jesus to the passion to lead. I can even use God-words to describe my desire to lead.

But if I’m more interested / spend more time / am more energized in leading than I am in following Jesus, my leadership is

¹⁸ David Prior, Inter-Varsity Press, 1987.

¹⁹ Both quoted in Jesus and Power, p. 12.

nothing more than a thinly veiled desire to get my own way. It's a power trap.

Plus, I get angry when public policy decisions adversely affect me. I think to myself, *"If I were in power, I would..."* The Tempter who invited Jesus to turn stones into bread applauds when I think that way.²⁰

I'm not alone in this. The thirst for power is everywhere. It's in all of us. And if I had the power I long for in my neighborhood, at church, or in the public square, I would be even more subject to power's corrupting power.

In all of history, there has only been one exception to the rule *"power corrupts."* Ironically, that Exception was the One who actually had absolute power.

The Great Exception - Jesus - used His power to wash dirty feet, to seek and to save the lost, and to give His life as a ransom for many.

From Christmas morning forward, Jesus emptied Himself of the free use of His power to bring you and me to God.

Or, as the Apostle Paul puts it, ***[2 Corinthians 8:9] For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.***

Today you are in one of two places in your own journey with or to Jesus.

You are either grateful for having received the gift of eternal life Jesus gave you when you believed OR you are on the outside looking in.

Either way, there is a next step you can take today.

If you have received the gift, take a next step into the abundant life He offers by walking by faith - pray, give, serve, speak, love.

If you have not yet received the gift of eternal life Jesus died to give you, see His utter faithfulness, take Him at His word, and receive the gift He's offering you.

Merry Christmas, indeed!

²⁰ The Lord of the Rings told a great story because it revolved around control of the ring of power, a ring that was destroyed by Frodo (with Gollum's help) in the fires of Mordor. The Harry Potter series told a great story because it ended with Harry burying the most powerful wand in the world with Dumbledore (book) / breaking the elder wand (movie).