

“What God Is Like”
Philippians 2:3-11, Part 1
May 11, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning we pause our series in the Gospel of Mark, and pick up once again our series in the Book of Philippians.

For about four years now, we have shifted between three different sections of the Scriptures throughout the year, looking at an Old Testament book in the fall, a Gospel from Christmas into the spring, and then an epistle in the late spring through the summer. This allows us to go deeply into each book, while also having a diversity of Biblical genres we hear from throughout the year.

And so, as we continue with that pattern, we’ll come back to Mark next January, and we return now to where we last left off in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Philippi.

Up to this point, Paul has been writing about perseverance through trials, about the gospel-fruit of joy, about the importance of Christian unity, and about the centrality of Christ to all of these things.

With all that in mind, let’s turn to our passage now: Philippians 2:3-11.

As we do, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

^{2:3} 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. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but 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. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we call to you, and we ask you to save us,
so that we might be your faithful servants, and live in light of your testimonies.
We put our hope in your words,
as we gather here now to meditate on your promises.
Hear our prayer, according to your steadfast love,
and help us to root ourselves in you.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:146-151]

Introduction

There is a lot going on here in our text this morning, and so we'll consider several aspects of it over several Sundays. Paul's main point here is actually ethical – it's about how the Philippians should think and act. But Paul roots that ethical exhortation in an astounding theological truth. And then he looks forward to how that ethic and how that truth will be eschatologically vindicated.

This morning, we'll start with the theological truth Paul roots the rest of the passage in. In coming weeks we'll consider the ethical and eschatological elements.

So, our focus this morning will be on what Paul has to say about what God is like.

And what we see here is that while we often think of God as self-focused and even conceited, he is actually truly humble, and because God is humble, he draws close to us when we are laid low, and even in our sin.

Let me say that again. We often think of God as self-focused or conceited. But because God is truly humble, he draws close to us when we are laid low, and even in our sin.

Let's break that down together.

We Often Think of God as Conceited

First, we often think of God as self-focused ... or even conceited.

By which I mean we can tend to think of God as being self-involved, and even prideful.

Now you might want to object to that, but I would argue that this is a tendency that we are all prone to, and have been since the first days of the human race.

Let me explain.

Paul here is contrasting two mindsets – two approaches to life. One, we see in verse three, is an approach of selfish ambition and conceit. That’s one mindset. The other mindset, we see in the same verse, is the approach of humility. And as soon as Paul calls us towards the approach of humility and away from the approach of selfish ambition and conceit, he calls us in verse five to think about how we view Jesus, and in verse six to think about how we view God.

Because Paul knows that a tendency to view God as self-focused and conceited is woven into our fallen natures.

The Bible tells us that God made our First Parents, and he placed them in the Garden of Eden, in a good and blessed and right relationship with him, and all was well.

But then Satan came in the form of a serpent. And Satan tempted Adam and Eve to rebel against God. And the way he tempted them involved telling them that God was selfish. God, Satan claimed, is actually characterized by selfish ambition, self-centeredness, and conceit.

And Satan argued that that was why God had forbidden them to eat from the fruit of one tree in the Garden: it was because rather than serving and loving Adam and Eve, God was being selfish and stingy towards them – God wanted to elevate himself, by holding them down. This was Satan’s argument: God is distant and selfish. He is conceited and detached from us. He wants to hoard good things for himself, at a distance, not draw close to us and bless us.

And Adam and Eve believed that lie. And they rebelled against God. And in that moment, that lie – that false belief about God – was absorbed into their hearts, and then passed on to every one of their descendants ... including you and me.

And that detached, disinterested, self-focused and conceited view of God is persistent and pervasive in human hearts, even today.

One theologian, whom we’ll return to later, describes it like this – he writes that when most people today speak about God, “they are usually referring to a hypothetical Being who lives at some distance from the world, *detached* from normal life. This Being may occasionally intervene, but for the most part stays aloof, watchful, vaguely disapproving.” [Wright, 51]

Most people’s ideas of God see him as someone who may have set the world in motion ... but since then he’s gone on to other things ... and has lost interest in most of us. Maybe he’s still tuned in to the big-picture events of world history ... or maybe he’s altogether disengaged. But in either case ... he’s usually not a god who’s overly concerned about the details of our lives ... or about little people in this world, far from the levers of power ... or about foolish people, who need help because they’ve made a mess of their lives ... or about people facing the common or ordinary problems we face. He’s not interested in drawing close to us or lifting us up in the midst of such difficulties. Rather ... he has his own self-focused interests ... his own self-centered priorities ... and we’re just not that important to him.

This is how most people view God ... as cold and disengaged – as conceited, self-focused, self-involved ... and not terribly concerned with others.

It's a view of God a lot like the one that Adam and Eve adopted ... after listening to the serpent.

And sometimes we Christians can adopt this view too – and even try to baptize and Christianize it and make it sound more pious. God shouldn't care about my little struggles and needs, we think ... because he's too high and exalted to be bothered by such things. God shouldn't meet me in the muck of my sin, we conclude... because he's too holy for that. Without realizing it, we try to recast this flawed view of God, that Satan first spoke to Eve in the Garden, and make it Christian – reframing God's disinterest as if it's one of his virtues.

But instead of trying to recast and excuse the conceit and self-focus we assume is part of God's character, the Bible calls us instead to recognize that the real flaw is in our assumption that God is like that.

And it's that false assumption that is the backdrop of our text. The first thing we need to do is to see it.

So, like our First Parents, we often think of God as self-focused and conceited.

But Because God Is Humble

And in our text this morning, in response to that false assumption, Paul directs us to the shocking Christian claim that God – the true God – is actually a humble God.

Now, Paul lays this claim out in a few ways, but to see it well, we're going to have to dig in to some of the more complicated details of the text. And as we do, commentator Gordon Fee will be our primary guide.

And one thing we see as we consider this is that Paul's description of God actually starts back in verse three.

In verse five, Paul says, "Have this mind among yourselves" – a mind he says in verse six was present in Jesus. But where does Paul describe that mind? Actually, back in verses three and four [Fee, 191-192]: there it's described as the mindset that's marked by humility, rather than selfish ambition or conceit. It's the mindset that's marked by concern for the interests of others, rather than just our own. That's the mindset, Paul says in verses five and six, that is found in Christ Jesus.

From there, Paul goes on to further elaborate on the nature of Jesus's humility in verse six.

The ESV translates verse six as saying that Jesus was one who: "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped."

Now here we need to get a little technical to clarify a few things. First, the way Paul is using the word "form" when he says that Jesus was "in the form of God" is much stronger than it comes across in English. It's not a statement that Jesus was like God but not really God. Instead, it means

that Jesus was “characterized by what was essential to being God” – he was God in very nature. In fact, some translations use that exact phrase. [Fee, 204-205, 198]

Paul is making an emphatic statement here of Jesus’s divinity – one of the strongest of such statements in the New Testament. [Fee, 207-208]

Jesus, Paul is saying, is God.

Which brings us to the next phrase we need to consider. What does Paul mean when he says that Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped”?

Again, we’re going to get a little technical here – it’ll only last a minute or two, but it matters for what we need to consider this morning, so even if this isn’t your thing, just hang in there for a minute.

Now, the Greek term translated there as “grasped” is rare, and its use here is a bit irregular. There’s been much scholarly discussion about how best to understand it, and so we should be cautious with any conclusion we come to. But drawing on the work of C.F.D. Moule and R.W. Hoover, Gordon Fee argues that the Greek word there is not actually functioning as a verb, with “equality with God” as its object, as the ESV has it, but rather it should be read as a verbal noun – describing the concept of grasping without an object.

The idea, then, would not be about whether Jesus considered grasping at equality with God ... but rather that Jesus did not consider equality with God to consist of grasping or being selfish. [Fee, 206-207]

Jesus was God. And at root here is what that meant for what God is like.

In the pagan world, divinity consisted in grasping and selfishness: the pagan gods using their position to grasp at and seize power, honor, and whatever else they desired. In the pagan political order, kingship consisted in grasping and selfishness as well: worldly kings using their position to grasp at and seize for themselves whatever they wanted.

But Paul’s shocking statement here is that when Jesus, who was by very nature God, came to earth, he did not consider equality with God – the nature of God – to consist of grasping or selfishness, like the pagans did. Instead of grasping, Paul explains in verse seven, Jesus displayed the divine nature by emptying himself.

Again, with that phrase “emptied himself” in verse seven, we have a verb with no object. The point, Gordon Fee explains, is not that Christ emptied himself of some specific attribute. But rather, he “simply ‘emptied himself’” – he “poured himself out.” [Fee, 210] Because that’s what God is like – that is his nature: to lovingly and humbly pour himself out for others.

Paul’s point is that when Jesus, who is God, came to earth and revealed God’s divine nature – his eternal character – what he revealed is that God, the true God, was not a God who grasped at or seized things for himself. He was not like the pagan gods and lords the Philippians had known

before. But Jesus's God-likeness "found its truest expression when 'he emptied himself' – when he poured himself out for others. [Fee, 208]

In Jesus we see that God's character doesn't consist in a conceited attitude or self-serving actions. Rather, God's character consisted in humility ... in loving service ... in pouring himself out for another. That is the character of God. [Fee, 197]

While we, so often, wrongly think of God as self-serving or conceited, God is actually truly humble – marked by self-giving, loving service, and humility.

That's what Paul is telling us about God here.

He Draws Close to Us When We Are Laid Low

And that has implications.

Next week we'll consider the implications for our conduct. But this morning, let's focus on the implications that have to do with God himself, and our relationship to him.

And as we do, what we see here is that because God is humble, he draws close to us when we are laid low.

While we may wrongly think of God as conceited, he is actually truly humble. And because God is humble, he draws close to us when we are laid low.

And this is made especially clear in verse seven. There Paul reminds us that when Jesus came – when he displayed the true character and nature of God, when he poured himself out – he took "the form of a servant" ... he took the form of a slave, for the sake of others. [Fee, 213-214]

Jesus lowered himself and poured himself out for others. And if you call on him in faith, then Jesus will also lower himself and pour himself out for you too. Because Jesus is God. And that's what God is like. He has a servant's heart.

Which means that ... when we are brought low ... there are no depths to which God will not go to draw close to us and meet us there.

Sometimes we think that because we are so small in the grand scheme of things – because we are so inconsequential to the world stage, because we are so unimportant to world history – because we are so small, God could not be concerned with us.

And maybe we especially feel that way when our lives feel broken ... and our troubles are humbling or humiliating. Other people might not even want to be bothered with our problems ... and so if they can't be bothered, why would God be interested? Wouldn't he want something more important to deal with? More interesting? A more public and prestigious problem to address?

Or maybe it's that our troubles can feel so mundane and ordinary when compared to other things.

Sure ... God cares about big world events – about presidents and politics, about nations and wars, about famous Christians doing big, bold things ... but us? With our little lives and our personal problems ... surely God is too high and lofty to care about such things ... right? He's focused on bigger things, that bring him bigger glory.

Such reasoning was true of many gods in the pagan world – many gods whom the Philippians had previously known.

But Paul is clear that such thinking cannot be applied to the God of the Bible. Because when the God of the Bible came into this world ... he took the form of a servant – a slave. He lowered himself to a position from which he could draw close to and serve anyone who would call on him for help. Because that's what God is like.

And so, in your inconsequential position in this world, no matter how low, God will draw close to you in the gospel. In your brokenness and struggle, no matter how deep, God will draw close to you, and minister to you. In your grief and anguish, no matter how dark, God will stoop down with you and embrace you. In your humiliation and loneliness, no matter how isolating, God will come alongside you and serve you. In your need, God will pour himself out for you.

Because that's what God is like.

Where have you been thinking wrongly about God? In what area of your life ... have you assumed, maybe even without realizing it, that God was too conceited to care about your struggles?

Look at Jesus, and see God's true character. Know that he cares. Know that it's not in spite of his being God, but rather, it's because he's God that he wants to draw close to you, and love you, and even serve you, pouring himself out for you, when you are laid low ... when you are in need.

While we often wrongly think of God as conceited, he is actually truly humble. And because God is humble, he draws close to us when we are laid low.

He Even Draws Close to Us in Our Sin

All that, in itself is striking.

But Paul doesn't end there.

Because God doesn't just draw close to us in lowliness. He even draws close to us in our sin.

Even when we have fallen into sin ... God – the true God – is One who will draw close to us, even in our sin.

Look at verse eight. Paul writes this about Jesus – about God come to earth as a man – he says: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

In Jesus Christ, God came to earth in human form. He drew close to us in our weakness, our brokenness, and our lowliness.

But that wasn't enough. Because, actually, our weakness and our brokenness and our lowliness aren't our biggest problems.

And we each know this. We try to hide it from others. We try to hide it from ourselves. But we each know that this is true. We know the things we've done, that we're ashamed of – that fill us with grief – even if others don't know about them. We know the things we've said or thought – terrible things, cruel things, mean-spirited and evil things – things that cause us to cringe when they come to mind even years later. And we know the things we've longed for – selfish and evil things we have wanted so badly in our hearts, despite whatever damage they would do to us or to others. We each know the blemishes in our own past. We each know the blackness in our own hearts.

And we each know that that's the biggest reason we believe that God cannot and will not draw close to us. If he truly sees us, if he truly knows us – if he sees the darkest thing we have ever done, or said, or thought, or longed for – if he knows the worst things there are to know about us ... then how could he ever draw close to us, except in judgment? He would never draw close to us in love or compassion. That's too far. That's too much to ask. God would not draw close to us in our sin, we tell ourselves.

And yet.

Paul reminds us here that in Jesus that is exactly what God came to do. He came to draw close to us specifically in our sin – even to take our sin from us and bear it himself. Because that's what happened on the cross. By willingly offering himself to death, even death on the cross – by going to that place obediently, Paul says in verse eight – Jesus was willingly taking our sin – its guilt and its shame – onto himself. He became intimately acquainted with the costs and the consequences of our sin, because he himself bore those costs and consequences, in his body and soul. God – the God of the Bible, the God who came in the person of Jesus Christ – God has made himself more intimately acquainted with your sin than you can imagine. He knows and understands the consequences, the costs, and just the ugliness of your sin better than anyone else – including you. And he willingly took all that onto himself ... all so that he might draw close to you. All so that you might be his.

That's what God's humble love looks like. That's how truly he is willing to pour himself out for you.

When God saw your sin ... he didn't respond with conceit or detachment ... he didn't respond with aloofness or cold indifference. He didn't turn from you and towards someone who's done a better job than you.

When God saw your sin, he drew close to you in the midst of it ... so close that he took the very consequences and shame of it all onto himself on the cross, and he paid the price for it, all so that you might be his.

That's what God is like. That's how humble, and loving, and gracious, and servant-hearted he is.

And after he's done all that ... how can we keep ourselves at a distance? After he has so revealed his heart for us ... how can we doubt the sincerity and humility of his love?

Though he is himself God, he did not consider equality with God to consist in grasping for himself, but in emptying himself, and so he took the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, all for our sake.

In Jesus Christ we get an especially clear picture of what God is really like. And so far from being conceited, prideful, disconnected, or selfish ... God – the true God – is truly humble. And because God is humble, he draws close to us when we are laid low – even in our sin.

Conclusion

Our text today reminds me of a story I've shared before from theologian N.T. Wright. He says this – he writes:

“A couple of years ago I was part of a panel discussion in the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford. The interviewer tossed me the question: ‘Was Jesus God?’ That's one of those trick questions that you can't answer straight on. It assumes that we all know what ‘God’ means, and we're simply asking if Jesus is somehow identified with this ‘God’. What we should say, instead, is: ‘It all depends what you mean by “God.”’ Well, what *do* people mean?

Wright continues: “When people say ‘God’ today [...] they are usually referring to a hypothetical Being who lives at some distance from the world, detached from normal life. This Being may occasionally intervene, but for the most part stays aloof, watchful, vaguely disapproving.

“Now if *that's* the sort of ‘God’ you hold – and in my experience it's pretty common – then of course to ask ‘Is Jesus God?’ is laughable. Jesus was a full-blooded human being. [...] [And] the sort of company he kept made reputable people – including his own family – look down their noses with disapproval. It's ridiculous to think of Jesus as being ‘God’ in that high-and-dry sense, detached and disapproving. (If you want to see what such a Jesus might look like, the B-grade biblical movies of [the past] will provide plenty of examples, with their dreary, dreamy Jesus-figures, who made lofty pronouncements and stared into the middle distance as though scanning the skies for angels.)”

But, Wright then asks, what if we turned the way we approach the question upside down? What if we don't try to fit Jesus into our assumptions about God, but what if we re-order our understanding of who God is based on Jesus? What if we, as Paul does in our text this morning, make Jesus the starting point of our understanding of God?

With something like that in mind, Wright continues. He writes:

“This is the really scary thing that [some] [...] never come to grips with; not that Jesus might be identified with a remote, lofty, imaginary being (any fool could see the flaw in that idea), but that God, the real God, the one true God, might actually look like Jesus. And not a droopy, pre-Raphaelite Jesus, either, but a shrewd Palestinian Jewish villager who drank wine with his friends, agonized over the plight of his people, taught in strange stories and pungent aphorisms, and was executed by the occupying forces. What does that do to Christian belief?”

Wright concludes:

“The Christian doctrine of the incarnation [...] is all about *a different sort of God* – A God who was so different to normal expectations that he could, completely appropriately, become human in, and as, the man Jesus of Nazareth. To say that Jesus is in some sense God is of course to make a startling statement about Jesus. It is also to make a stupendous claim about God.” [Wright, 51-52]

And at the heart of that stupendous claim, is the fact that God – the true God – the God of the Bible ... is a humble God. He is a God who is characterized by humbly and lovingly pouring himself out for others.

And so, brothers and sisters, whatever has laid you low – whether it’s in your circumstances or in your heart, whether it is in your brokenness or in your sin – in whatever has laid you low, turn to God – to the true God who has come in Jesus Christ – and he will draw close to you.

Because that’s who he is. He is the God who dwells with the lowly. He is the God who came to save sinners. He is the God who draws close to his people. That’s what he is like.

And he will draw close, even to us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

McDonough, Sean M. Introduction and notes to Philippians in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.

Wright, N. T. *Who Was Jesus?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.