

“What God Calls Us to Be Like”
Philippians 2:3-11, Part 2
May 18, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to Paul’s letter to the Christians in Philippi, and we are actually coming back a second time to the text we looked at last week.

As we mentioned then, there’s a lot going on in this passage. Paul’s main point is ethical: how we should live. But the foundation of that point is anchored in a theological claim: what God is like. And then Paul points both towards the eschatological: what God will do in the future.

Last week we focused on the theological foundation of this passage: Paul’s claim about what God is like.

This week we’ll build on that, by considering the ethical point Paul is making from that theological claim.

So this week we focus on what Paul is calling us to do – what he says God is calling us, as his people, to be like.

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

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, look upon us and deliver us,
for we do not forget your word.
Great is your mercy,
and so we ask you to give us life according to your law.
The sum of your word is truth,
and every line of your word endures forever.
And so help us to attend to it now,
we ask in Jesus's name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:153-154, 156, 159-160]

Introduction

So last week, we focused on what this passage tells us about what God is like, and we said that the God of the Bible is truly humble. And because God is humble, he draws close to us when we are laid low, and even in our sin. That's what we saw last week: that's what God is like. That is the grace and love he shows us in the gospel. And that sermon is on our website if you missed it.

This week, we shift to Paul's main point about what we should be like in light of those gospel truths.

And as we consider that theme of our text, what we see is that: Since we are made, and being remade, in the image of the true God, we should strive to be like Jesus by pouring ourselves out for others, both those who are close to us, and those who are more distant from us.

Let me say that again: Since we are made, and being remade, in the image of the true God, we should strive to be like Jesus by pouring ourselves out for others, both those who are close to us, and those who are more distant from us.

Let's break that down together.

We Are Made & Being Remade in the Image of God

First, we are made and being remade in the image of God.

Paul alludes to this in verse five, where he calls us to pattern ourselves after Jesus – who himself is God.

The Bible tells us that when God made humanity, he made us in his image. We were made to be the very image of God. This is our greatest glory – the foundation of all our beauty and all our dignity. We are made in the image of the wonderful and glorious God who made the universe.

But then we rebelled against that God. And when we did, we twisted the image of God in ourselves. We marred it. We did not completely lose the image of God – a true remnant of it still remained. But even so, the image had been marred and desecrated in us by our own sin.

Such was our state after we had rebelled against our Maker.

And yet ... God ... the true God ... did not leave us in that state.

Instead, in the person of Jesus Christ, he came to save us – he came to redeem us – he descended to our low estate, all so that he might rescue us – purchasing us back for himself in his sacrificial death on the cross, as Paul mentions in verse eight.

And upon calling us to himself, he also began his work to restore his image in us – to untwist what we had twisted, to purify what we had sullied, to wipe clean what we have marred – so that his image would shine bright and pure in us once again.

God, who made us in his image, is now remaking in his image all who call on him in faith. That glorious promise of the gospel is assumed in Paul's statement in verse five, where he refers to the mindset which is ours in Christ Jesus. Paul there is alluding to the restoring work of the gospel – restoring us more fully to the image of God as we trust in Jesus Christ.

In creation we were made in the image of God, and in the gospel we are being remade in the image of God.

That's the first thing we see here.

The Image of the True God, Not a False God

But once we say that ... we have to ask, "Which God?"

Because as we talked about last week, verses six and seven are very much about what kind of God this God is, whose image we bear.

We spent more time on this last week, drawing from the work of Gordon Fee, and I'm not going to repeat all those details of the grammar and the Greek today – that discussion is on our website in last week's sermon.

But Paul begins by stating that Jesus himself is God. His statement in verse six that Jesus "was in the form of God" is actually much stronger than it comes across in English. It means that Jesus was "characterized by what was essential to being God" – he was God in very nature. [Fee, 204-205, 198]

Paul is emphatically stating here that Jesus is God.

And then, he goes on to describe what that means.

As Fee argues, the Greek word that's translated in verse six as "grasped" is probably not actually functioning as a verb – with "equality with God" as its object – as the ESV has it, but rather, it's likely functioning as a verbal noun – describing the concept of grasping.

The idea, then, is not 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. [Feel, 206-207]

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

For the pagan gods, their divinity was all about grasping and selfishness – using their position to grasp at and seize power, honor, and whatever else they desired.

But Paul's shocking statement here is that when Jesus, who was by very nature God, came to earth, he did not consider the nature of God to consist of grasping or selfishness, like the pagan gods did.

Instead, as Paul explains in verse seven, Jesus considered the nature of God to consist in emptying himself ... and not emptying himself of some specific attribute or anything like that, but rather the nature of God was displayed in him pouring himself out. [Fee, 210] Because that's what God is like – that is his nature: to lovingly and humbly pour himself out for others.

That's what the God of the Bible is like.

And that's not just what he was like for the handful of decades he walked the earth in the person of Jesus Christ. That's what the God of the Bible has always been like.

The Bible tells us that God's self-giving love, his sacrificial love, his pouring himself out for others – this trait is not something God added on to his character in the gospel or the incarnation or after making the world ... but it's something that's at the heart of God's very nature – and has been from all eternity.

Because God has always poured himself out to bless others – even in eternity past ... when he was all that existed.

The Bible tells us that God is not one person, but three persons. And God has always existed as three persons. And from all eternity, those three persons have been in an active relationship with one another. And that active relationship has always been a relationship of love and self-giving. From all eternity, God the Father has poured himself out in love towards God the Son. And from all eternity, God the Son has poured himself out in love towards God the Father. And from all eternity, God the Holy Spirit has poured himself out in love towards them both. Each member of the Trinity has, from all eternity, poured himself out in love for the others. Because that's who God is – that's what God is like.

The Triune God of the Bible is not just capable of love, but the Bible tells us that the Triune God of the Bible is love. [1 John 4:8] Self-giving love is fundamental to who God is, from all eternity, because before the creation of the world, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit lived in an eternal relationship of perfect, self-giving love, pouring themselves out for one another.

That's the image God made us in in creation, and that's the image God is re-making us in in the gospel.

And it's very different from the image of the pagan gods – or really of any god that is not triune.

False gods – man-made pagan gods – are selfish and conceited. They are self-seeking and grasping.

They do not share the true image of the loving and self-giving God who made us, but they often display instead the image of our fallen, sinful nature.

But we have fashioned ourselves in the image of these false and selfish pagan gods. God – the true God – originally made us in his image, and he is working now to restore us to his image – the image of a God who is fundamentally characterized by self-giving love – by pouring himself out for the good of others.

We have been made, and in the gospel we are being remade, in the image of the Triune God of the Bible, and not in the image of the false gods of the unbelieving world.

Therefore, We Should Strive to Be Like Jesus

And as God remakes us in his image, Paul here calls us to cooperate, by striving ourselves to be like Jesus, by pouring ourselves out for others.

Since we are made, and being remade, in the image of the Triune God, and not a false god, we should strive to be like Jesus, by pouring ourselves out for others.

This is the ethical call Paul gives us here in this passage.

He says in verse three, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.”

And before we move on from that, we need to recognize that there are many ways we can act in selfish ambition and conceit. And a lot of them are not spectacular and brash, but ordinary and mundane.

It is the selfish ambition that tries to lift ourselves up at work by selfishly pushing someone else down. It's the selfish ambition that speaks an unkind word about our classmate in school, in order to give our own social status a bit of a boost. It's the selfish ambition that grasps at money as a way to secure or insulate ourselves from others. It's the selfish ambition that projects a false image of our virtue so that others think we're better than we know we really are.

And it's the conceit that decides that someone else isn't worth our time – that their wellbeing isn't worth our efforts – that in day-to-day life, it's our interests that really matter, not theirs.

This is the kind of selfish ambition and conceit that afflicts not just the elites of our society ... but every one of us in some way.

And when we think or feel or speak or act in these selfish and grasping ways, then we are living out the details of our lives in the image of the grasping, selfish, pagan gods, rather than in the image of the true, self-giving God of the Bible.

And Paul is calling us here to repent of that. He calls us in verse three, in humility, to count others more significant than ourselves. He calls us in verse four to look not only to our own interests, but also to the interest of others. And in verses five through eight, he calls us to have the same mind among ourselves as is ours in Christ Jesus, who emptied himself – who poured himself out – for others, taking the form of a servant, for our sake – even giving his life for us on the cross.

We are called to image God by walking in Christ's footsteps – by pouring ourselves out for others just as he has poured himself out for us.

And that might sound dramatic ... but more often than not, the ways God calls us to do this look quite ordinary.

In fact, there are already ways we do this – already ways that we image God in this way ... though we often fail to see them, or to recognize their significance.

Thomas Howard makes this point by drawing on the thinking of Charles Williams – one of the Inklings. For Williams, Howard notes: "Your giving me a hand with my luggage is not a *symbol* of Divine Charity. It is a case in point of that Charity, since, like the Cross, it exhibits, momentarily and infinitesimally, to be sure, exactly the same exchange, namely 'My life for yours'. In the luggage situation, 'my life' is merely a minute perhaps of inconvenience for you. Nevertheless, it is a real thing, and a fragment of your time is a real 'piece' of your life, which you are donating for my assistance." [Howard, 35]

What is Howard saying?

His point is that even the mundane ways we help or serve others are themselves real expressions of the image of the Triune God, who, both in the cross and in eternity, pours himself out for others.

Think of it like this: You have a finite number of minutes of life in this world. None of us know how many minutes. But we all know that on this side of the resurrection, our life here is limited.

At the moment the average life expectancy in the US is 77 and a half years. That's around 40 million minutes – a little less for men, a bit more for women. Now, you'll spend about 12 million of those asleep. So on average, we have about 28 million waking minutes in this life.

That is your life.

And that means that every minute you serve someone in a loving and sacrificial way, you are choosing to pour out a portion of your life as a loving sacrifice to bless them.

For most of us, God will not call us to pour our lives out all at once in a grand act of martyrdom. But he does call each one of us to pour out portions of our lives for the people around us ... and then to do it again, and again, thousands of times over.

Five minutes helping someone with their luggage here ... twenty minutes listening to someone's struggles there ... ninety minutes getting coffee with someone to help them sort out a difficult struggle they're facing ... four minutes changing a diaper ... seventy-five minutes repairing someone's appliance for them ... sixty minutes making a meal for someone else ... forty-five minutes teaching Sunday school to our children ... thirty minutes investing in a child ... drip by drip, minute by minute, ounce by ounce, we pour our lives out for the people God has placed around us.

And as we do that, we truly image the God who made us – who always pours himself out for others.

And to let that pattern saturate our lives – to let each moment be characterized by us choosing to be poured out as a drink offering for the good of others – to live out our lives as living sacrifices – to do that drip by drip, minute by minute, ounce by ounce, is difficult in many ways ... but it's not complicated.

It's not complicated because it doesn't require any special opportunity or skill. You don't need advanced training to do it. You don't need to live in a special moment of history to carry this out. You don't need to be unusually smart or wealthy – you don't need to be single or married or be at a particular stage of life. We are all able to pour ourselves out for others – even if it's just five minutes at a time. It's as simple as lending a hand or an ear. It's sacrificing an ordinary slice of our time – a very real portion of our lives – for their good.

That is a sacrifice. But it's a sacrifice Paul reminds us we're able to make, because we were made in the image of a sacrificial God ... and in the gospel we are being remade in that image. It is God who is remaking us – not we ourselves. Paul here calls us to cooperate with what God is doing – to strive to be what he is already making us to be: image-bearers of the self-giving God who pours himself out for others.

Since we are made, and being remade, in the image of the Triune God, we should strive to be like Jesus towards others, by lovingly pouring ourselves out for their sake.

Towards Those Who Are Close to Us

And often that pattern and that calling starts with those who are closest to us.

As you think about this calling, and its roots in the image of God ... are you starting to see how ... when you care for or serve, for example, a close family member: when you, kids, do something kind for your brother or your sister ... when you do something to help your mother or your father ... or when you, parents, cook something or clean something for your child ... when you, husbands and wives, serve your spouse in some way – with every meal cooked for someone else, every load of laundry washed for someone else, every paycheck deposited in order to be spent providing for someone else – when you do each of these things, do you recognize that you are, in those actions, reflecting and showing forth the image of the Triune God of the Bible? You are showing something of his character. You are acting out of his true nature. You are pointing to and glorifying him. Because that is what he is like.

He is the God who pours himself out for others – it's what he did in history when he came to earth as Jesus Christ and went willingly to cross. And it's what he has been doing from all eternity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And so whenever you give of yourself to another – whenever you pour out even just a little of your life – one drip, one minute, one ounce at a time – as you do that, you are imaging the true nature of the Triune God.

We all show his self-giving nature of God in some area of our lives, and in that we should rejoice.

But Paul's point here is that we also, in other areas of life, often fail to show God's image and self-giving nature. In fact, we each – and some of us more than others – can see many areas of life where we are instead imaging the grasping, false gods of the pagan world. We can see ways where our actions, or our words, or our thoughts are characterized by the selfishness and conceit and pride that Paul decries in verse three – the selfishness, conceit, and pride that characterized the pagan gods.

Where do you see that pattern in your relationships with those who are closest to you?

As a spouse, do you see ways in which you are imaging not the self-giving of the Christian God, but the selfish grasping of the pagan gods – demanding things for yourself, insisting on your own way, demanding that you get back at least as much as you give in the relationship, conceitedly assuming that your interests are far more important than your spouses? And let me be clear here: I'm not asking you to think about how your spouse does this, or how others do this – I'm calling you to consider the ways that you look more like the grasping gods of the pagans than the self-giving God of the Bible in your marriage. And if you see that, then God, in this passage, is calling you to repentance.

If you're a parent, do you see ways you do the same thing with your children? Is your relationship with them more about what you get than what you give? When you relate to your kids, do you sometimes resemble the grumpy, moody, unpredictable pagan gods, more often than you resemble the patient, loving God of Scripture? If so, God, in this passage, is calling you to repentance.

Children ... when you think of how you relate to your parents ... or to your siblings ... do you see ways that your words and your thoughts are selfish and grasping, rather than sacrificial and giving? Are there times where you act and think like what you want is the only thing that really matters, and you ignore the interests of your brother or sister, your mother or father? It's good to remember

that that's not how God has treated you. And if you see those selfish patterns in behavior, then God, in this passage, is calling you to turn from that.

God has made us to be glorious – to show forth his glorious nature of loving sacrifice and self-giving. But when we act in conceit and selfishness, we further twist the image of God within us, exchanging the glorious image of the Triune God for the shameful image of the ugly, self-serving, pagan gods.

Where do you see that dynamic in your own life right now?

Paul here calls us to turn from our selfishness, and to seek instead the mindset and the image of the God who made us, and redeemed us – to seek to image the true God – the Christian God – in how we relate to others, by pouring ourselves out to bless them, rather than grasping at what we want for ourselves.

And that calling often starts with those who are closest to us.

Towards Those Who Are More Distant From Us

It starts with those who are close to us. But it doesn't end with those who are close to us.

Far from it actually.

Because the Bible tells us that that attitude of loving self-giving is not just for those who are close to us, but is to extend to those who are more distant from us as well.

Because Christ, when he came to earth, extended his loving self-giving not just to the righteous, but to sinners – not just those who were close, but those who were far off.

And he calls us to do the same.

In Luke 14 Jesus calls us to lovingly serve not just our friends and family, but also those who are socially and economically beneath us – just as Jesus did. [Luke 14:12-14]

In Matthew 5, Jesus called us to lovingly pour ourselves out for sinners – even sinners who hate us – just as God “makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” And when we do this, Jesus explains – when we love our enemies – we show ourselves to be sons of our Father in heaven [Matthew 5:43-48] – we more truly bear his image.

Who is it that is distant from you – who you might see as beneath you – whether socially or economically, intellectually or physically, morally or spiritually – who is it that is distant from you and, in your eyes, less deserving than you are ... but whom God is calling you to pour yourself out for, so that you might display the image of your Father in heaven more clearly – your Father, who seeks those who are far off [Acts 2:39] – and even those who despise and reject him? [1 Timothy 1:15]

Since we are made, and being remade, in the image of the Triune God, we should strive to be like Jesus, by pouring ourselves out for those who are close to us, and those who are more distant from us.

Conclusion

That calling, of course, is difficult.

But thankfully, Paul does not urge us to accomplish it by our own strength. He doesn't call us to look deep in our hearts to find the drive that we need there. He doesn't call us to dig deep into our willpower to find there the push we need to persevere. Rather ... he calls us to look up, to Jesus.

Paul does, after all, spend the majority of this passage directing our eyes to Jesus and what he has done for us.

Because it's only as we consider what Jesus has done for us – as we discussed last week – that we can then do what he calls us to do. We need to start by remembering how he came in the form of a servant, for our sake. How he went to the cross for our salvation. How he poured himself out ... for us.

And if we really see that – if we really believe that ... then how can we not seek to do likewise? If we see the beauty and the glory of all that he has done for us ... then how could we not want to be like him – like the beautiful Savior who loved us and gave himself for us? How can we long to have any other mindset than his? How can we long to bear any other image than his?

And so, brothers and sisters, as we look to Jesus ... as we consider his cross, where he poured himself out for us ... when we see the needs of those around us ... let us also pour ourselves out for others in acts of self-giving: drip by drip, minute by minute, ounce by ounce ... so that we might more and more reflect the image of our beautiful Triune God.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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

Howard, Taylor. *Dove Descending: A Journey Into T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2006.

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.