

**Philippians 2:1-11**  
**The Paradox of Greatness & Servanthood**  
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If you remember your study of mythology from school, you no doubt remember the legend of Narcissus. Narcissus was an uncommonly handsome boy. People couldn't help but fall in love with him because of his beauty, but Narcissus was too proud and arrogant to return that love. While out walking one day, the boy happened upon a pool of water. Leaning over, he caught a glimpse of the most beautiful face he had ever seen. Narcissus immediately became enamored with what he saw and experienced heart-pounding rapture at the sight of what was, of course, his own reflection. He was so mesmerized by that face in the pool, he failed to notice anything else—he could not move, he could not eat, he could not drink. His world began to shrink to the size of that reflection in the water. Eventually he died, and the myth goes that mourners could not even find his body. In his place all that remained was a single flower.

Narcissus was the epitome of what we would call “being full of oneself.” His beauty was truly great, even legendary, but his greatness led him along a path of self-absorption and self-promotion. And, of course, Narcissus is not just a legend that lives in mythology. He is very much alive and well, as we see every day. In fact, in many ways we live in a culture that is built firmly on the principles of achieving greatness through self-promotion. Look in nearly any sphere of life—sports, politics, education, business, and I'm sorry to say, all too frequently even the church, and you'll find evidence of those who believe that for them to win, everyone else must lose. For them to succeed, others must fail. For them to be great, other people must be stepped on and treated as insignificant. For a narcissist, greatness is a zero-sum game.

I doubt it will come as any surprise that as Paul's letter to the Philippians continues, he wants his friends in Philippi to know that there is a different path to greatness—a path that doesn't involve succeeding at someone else's expense, or continually trumpeting one's own cause or defending one's accomplishments or position. Unlike the path Narcissus chose, it is also a path that won't disappoint or fail. We won't come to the end of our life leaving nothing behind of true significance, because the greatness Paul has in mind is one that counts for eternity. To achieve this kind of greatness, we have to follow the way of Jesus, and the way of Jesus is to become a servant.

Servanthood, as Jesus practiced it, is not something that comes easily or naturally to most of us, and Paul knew that. He tells the church at Philippi that to develop a lifestyle of service we need to have the same mindset or attitude that Jesus had, and there are three key words Paul uses to describe that mindset: **unity, humility and obedience.**

In calling for there to be **unity** in the church, the first thing Paul does is lay the groundwork for that unity. He gives four reasons why unity is important not just to him, but to the entire believing community, and those four reasons are found in verse 1. The “if” in that verse is not meant to convey doubt or uncertainty, as it usually does in English. For us to get the real meaning of what Paul is saying, a better word for “if” would be “since.” Since you have received encouragement in Christ, since you’ve been consoled in love, since you share together in the Spirit, since you have received compassion and sympathy—since you have experienced these four realities together, they are to form the basis of your unity as believers.

Apparently something has disrupted the Philippians’ ability to get along, so after laying out the “why” in verse 1, in verse 2 Paul describes what unity will look like, and again, it’s in four parts: first, be of the same mind which refers to having a common attitude or orientation, not to agreeing on everything; second, have the same love; third, be in full accord which has the sense of being “joined souls”; and fourth, he repeats the call to be of one mindset or having a shared attitude. Thus, unity involves mind, heart, and soul. Not surprisingly, as we find out in vs. 5, what Paul is exhorting the Philippians to do can really be summed up by saying, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” who was of one mind with the Father. After calling them to this unity, Paul moves on to talk about humility.

Paul cannot make it more clear than he does in this passage. To have the mind of Christ means being **humble**, free of selfish ambitions or conceit. It means regarding others as better than yourself and putting the needs of others before your own. Then Paul gives the ultimate example: of all people, Jesus had every reason to bask in his greatness. There he was, equal with God, of the same Spirit as God, God’s very own Son, and what did he do? Instead of grasping all that made him great, he let go. He emptied himself, poured himself out, and humbled himself to become less than what he was. I mentioned last week that Paul’s letters were intended to be read in a worship setting, and so they frequently contain liturgical elements. The hymn in verses 6-11 is our first such example in this letter. Whether Paul originally composed this hymn or whether he simply inserted it, scholars don’t know. But, what we do know is that Paul’s use of this Jesus hymn is no accident. He is reminding the church that if you’re going to have the mind of

Christ, if you're going to live a life worthy of being called Jesus' followers; if you're going to be great in the kingdom of God, you have to become like Jesus—and Jesus emptied himself and became a servant.

When we take on the humility of Christ, what does that look like? Each one of us will have different answers to that question based on our specific circumstances, but I'll share a couple of ideas that have challenged me over the past several months. It might mean that we begin to look at people who are typically invisible to us—perhaps the homeless person on the street or the barista behind the espresso machine or the cleaning lady in your office complex. It might be the guy servicing your air conditioning or the mobility-challenged person you zip around in the grocery aisle or the tech at the doctor's office who takes your blood pressure. There are so many people we pass and never see—because we're in a hurry, we're distracted, or we're looking past them to see someone or something else—in short, because we're caught up in our own interests. But if we take the time to notice them, how might we bless or serve them for the sake of Christ?

Having the humility of Christ means we affirm the worth and dignity of all human beings, simply because they bear the imprint of God, and when we affirm the worth of others, we have to pay more attention to the judgments we make that are based on appearances or on some outward measure of success. It means that we become aware—of other people, of other perspectives, of other needs, of other realities. We don't grasp at our way as right or even best. Humility means always remembering that we have not walked a mile in anyone else's shoes—which is another way of saying, we don't know their heart. Only God knows that. Our only responsibility is to pour ourselves out on their behalf in love not because we think they do or don't deserve it, but because that is what a humble servant does.

After calling the church to unity and humility, Paul concludes by calling them to **obedience**, and what he has in mind is the example of Jesus' obedience to go to the cross. The Gospel of Matthew records the scene vividly. Jesus is “grieved and agitated” (26:37) and wants a quiet place to pray. When he is finally alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, he says, “I am deeply grieved, even to [the point of] death...” He throws himself on the ground and continues his prayer, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” (26:38-39) Jesus gets up, but returns to pray a second time, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” (26:42) He gets up again only to return and pray the same words a third time. (26:44)

When Paul says in verse 8 that Jesus “became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” he was reminding the church that this was nothing less than a gut-wrenching, dark night of the soul, moment of truth for Jesus. He absolutely did not want any part of the cross—not the pain, the humiliation, the physical suffering, the mental or emotional anguish, the separation from those he loved. In the garden, he wrestled with his choice, just as we have choices over which we wrestle. Would Jesus choose the easy way or the hard way? The way that felt best to him or that put the needs of others first? Would he choose humble service or selfish ambition? Greatness as the world defines it or greatness that comes through selfless acts of obedience?

Obedience is molded in the small, daily, often hidden choices we make. Jesus would not have arrived at Gethsemane able to make the big, hard choice but for the fact that he had made numerous choices of obedience at smaller, more mundane decision points all along the way. Obedience will not be convenient. It won't come without cost. It will not be comfortable. But, it is how we develop the mind of Christ. The mind of Christ is one that may honestly say, I don't like this place. I wish I wasn't here, but since I am here, what would you have me learn? What would you have me do? How do I need to grow? How can I become more like you? In what ways would you have me be obedient to your will rather than my own?

These are questions Narcissus would never dream of asking. The epitome of self-centeredness, he lived for himself, and his legacy, his “greatness” was one solitary flower. Contrast that with a lively, gracious lady named Margaret Wilson Thomas, who died at the age of 89. Ms. Thomas lived for nearly 50 years in an 1880 farmhouse just 3 or 4 miles from me in Virginia. She was known throughout the region as The Iris Lady. Her garden was legendary—a 5 acre plot planted with over 2000 different varieties of irises plus hundreds of peonies and day lilies, tens of thousands of bulbs in all.

When it was in full bloom, the garden was so stunning it would literally stop traffic along busy Lawyers Road, but what was most impressive to me was the way Ms. Thomas gave of herself to others. Artists of every age and skill were welcomed to her home to draw or paint; photographers came to shoot rolls of film; and school children by the busloads enjoyed the Iris Lady's hospitality and passion. Gardeners came not only to admire the garden but to share in its bounty. You see, visitors seldom left without bulbs to take back to their own gardens, so plants from Ms. Thomas continue to bloom in literally hundreds of gardens and

landscapes as a living tribute to her extraordinary love for both irises and thousands of complete strangers.

Narcissus left a single stem; the Iris Lady a vast field of purple beauty that lives on—that's the difference in a life lived for self and a life poured out for others. The question is: what will we choose? We know, don't we, what choice Jesus would have us make, because he showed us by his own example of unity, humility and obedience.

Thanks to be God. Amen.