



STOOPING TO NEW LOWS

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Did you ever stop to think through all of Federal Way's claims to fame? This city has a long and illustrious history. The skater Apolo Ohno once lived here. The biggest synchronized swimming event in the world was once held right where we have our baptisms. Who could forget Sanjaya? We used to have the Bonsai Garden. We've still got that old cabin building on 348th. But something you probably DIDN'T know was that a world record holder also lives in Federal Way

Check this out: His name is Dennis Walston, and he holds the world record for lowest limbo. He made it under a bar that was just 6 inches off the ground! He set the record in 1991 at the age of 46. A few years later, he was shown in this video going even a little lower. He still lives right here in town, so keep an eye out for a man in his 60s who walks with his head almost touching the ground.

I thought about calling this morning's message "How Low Can You Go?" because we're talking about the spiritual equivalent of limboing – humility. In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul has been casting a vision for them of what Christian community looks like. Today we come to a place where he develops this theme of humility and shows why it matters in church life. And as we'll see, he sets the bar pretty low.

Philippians 2:3-11

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross!*

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

F.F. Bruce once said that of all the New Testament authors, Paul is the one who has stamped his own personality most unmistakably on his writings. You can see that in this passage. He starts out talking about how much he wants the church to avoid pride and live humbly with each other. Then he relates that to Jesus, and once he starts talking about Jesus, he can't help himself. He gets so caught up in thinking and talking about the Lord that he launches into this song of praise. Before you know it, you're no longer focused on humility, you're looking at Jesus, which is classic Paul. I want to be like that!

It's a wonderful progression of ideas, actually, because ultimately that's what humility does – it points us back to Christ and leads us to worship him more.

I don't think anybody here would argue with the idea that humility is a good thing. We all prefer hanging around with humble people more than with arrogant ones. And pride is in the shadows of most conflicts that arise, inside or outside the church. But if we were to define what it should look like, what would we say?

One definition I read called it “a feeling of being of little worth.” Another one described it as “a sense of one's own unworthiness through imperfection and sinfulness.” Some would say humility is having proper perspective on yourself in comparison to other people.

We've probably all thought of humility in those terms. But if we look a little more closely, those definitions don't quite mesh with what Paul is talking about here. Look again at what we just read:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

If humility is an attitude Christ can have, then it can't be about feeling unworthy, because Christ WAS worthy. It can't be about recognizing your own imperfection and sinfulness, because he was perfect and he never sinned. And it can't be about gaining proper perspective on yourself, because Jesus' humility certainly wasn't about that. Right perspective would have put him at the top.

So Paul must be working with a different concept of humility. And what he tells the Philippians is this:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

Notice that Paul doesn't launch directly into a description of Christ's humble attitude. Instead he goes back to who Jesus IS – his identity and character. And he reminds us that he is one in nature with God the Father. They are of the same substance. Jesus isn't SORT OF God or PART God – he is 100% united with God the Father. Before Jesus came to earth, there was no confusion in heaven about who he was. So his becoming humble wasn't an attempt to change or correct who he was.

And Christ knew this. He was secure in his understanding of himself, to the point where he wasn't concerned with hanging on to that equality he shared with God. Paul says he didn't see it as something to be “grasped.” The Greek there implies something to be exploited, something to be squeezed for all its worth. And Christ didn't need to do that with his own status. He didn't need to exploit it, because he knew who he was and he was secure in his relationship with his Father.

So I see two truths in this that help us understand Paul's thinking. First,

Humility is rooted in a strong sense of identity.

The less comfortable we feel with who we are, the less humble we will be. Insecurity breeds arrogance. Have you heard the term Napoleon complex? It's the idea that some men who are short in stature will act extra aggressive or drive big trucks or seem really conceited. But it's all compensation for the insecurity they feel about their height.

Let me tell you, Napoleon complex isn't just for shorties. We all are guilty at times of inflating the image we project to the world to make up for how shaky we feel about ourselves on the inside.

When we don't know or like who we are, we try to exploit everything to our advantage. We make desperate grabs for significance to try and fill the hollowness.

And if we try to be humble when that strong sense of identity is missing, humility becomes about people pleasing. We act as if we're putting other people ahead of ourselves because we're secretly hoping they'll like us better for it. It's a false humility with an agenda behind it.

Where do you get your sense of identity? Is it your work? A relationship? Your abilities? If it's something that can be threatened or shaken, like a job, then you will constantly be working to advance yourself to protect that identity. If a talent or skill becomes your identity, then any criticism of you in that area will crumple you, and if someone else is good at that, you'll feel threatened. I remember talking with a church choir director once who had come to the realization that she had always thought of music as her identity, and it was so freeing for her to discover it didn't have to be.

If your identity's wrapped up in something shallow, like your appearance or your possessions, then you will live in a constant state of comparison and worry about every pound you gain or stock market drop.

Remember in the very first verse of our text, Paul had said this:

...in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

You can't do that unless your identity is solid, because otherwise, if you think someone might be better than you, you'll feel compelled to raise your standing to compete. The only way to put the needs of others first is to start with knowing who you are.

So who are you? What makes you you? If you have put your faith in Jesus, that actually redefines your core. It helps you find your true self.

In the movie National Treasure, Nicholas Cage is in search of an enormous, mysterious treasure that has been hidden for centuries. Toward the beginning of the movie, he's looking for a clue on a ship frozen in the Arctic. He finds this exquisitely carved pipe that has a coded message on it.

But then the pipe is put away and you kind of forget about it until the end of the movie. The explorers are near the end of their quest, and there is a wall between them and the treasure. It looks like a dead end, except there is some sort of lock mechanism with a hole in the middle. And suddenly Nicholas Cage realizes that the pipe is the key. He takes it out and it fits perfectly into an opening in the wall. That unlocks an enormous wealth of treasure that was hidden there all the time.

That's a great analogy for how we find our identity in Christ. Some of us are like intricately carved works of art. We think our identity is about the way we're made, the qualities we like about ourselves. And we think that's all there is to us. But like that pipe, our identity is much bigger than that. It's only when we're in Christ that we unlock the tremendous treasures he intended for us.

Let me just give you a brief partial list of the wealth that go along with your identity in Christ. You are:

- Loved by the God of the universe (John 3:16)
- A new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- Free (Galatians 5:1)
- Uniquely gifted by God (Ephesians 4:17)
- Safe (John 10:28)
- Forgiven (1 John 2:12)
- A child of God (1 John 3:1)
- A person of purpose (Ephesians 2:10)
- God's home (1 Corinthians 6:19)

- An heir of all God's promises (Galatians 3:29)

That is all solid, secure stuff that we don't need to worry about, we don't need to scramble for and we don't need to protect. If we're in Christ, all that is ours. I want to challenge you this week to look up these verses. And if there's something on this list that you struggle with believing – ask God to help you with that. Ask someone else to pray for you about it. The more sure-footed we are in our understanding of that identity, the more room we will have for humility. This is closely linked with a second concept I take from Paul's text, which is

Humility is built on trust in God.

Paul tells us Jesus didn't feel the need to hang on to his equal status with God. As I said, he was secure in his identity. But part of his security rested on his ability to trust his Father with the future.

Jesus knew that God's character is good and loving and just. And he knew that his Father's actions are always 100% consistent with his character. He also believed that God has ultimate control of his creation. So he knew that nothing could happen to him outside of God's awareness or that would prevent him from accomplishing his will.

That kind of trust changes everything. If you believe God has you covered, you don't need to take matters into your own hands. You don't need to push past other people to promote yourself, because you know God has your best interest in mind, whatever your situation.

Sometimes I prefer to trust my own abilities. I know what I can and can't do. I like to have a sense of being in control, so I take back the reins and strike out on my own. But once again, then it becomes all about me, which leaves little room for being humble, because I will be focused on my own performance.

Humility begins with having confidence in God – that he loves me and that I can count on him to have my best interest at heart.

That's a lot of backdrop for our discussion, but it's so foundational. That's what enabled Jesus to do what he did, and if we're supposed to share his attitude, it will need to come from the same place – a strong sense of identity and a strong trust in God.

Paul then goes into a description of what Christ's humble attitude looked like.

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

*And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross!*

There are two sides to Jesus' humility – the things he gave up and the things he took on. He gave up the benefits of being Lord of the universe, and he took on the burden of being not just a human, but a servant.

There were many things Jesus left behind when he left heaven, but I'd like to just consider two this morning. To begin with, he had to **give up the right to be right**. In other words, he allowed himself to suffer being wronged without fighting the injustice of it. That's incredibly difficult to do.

On the radio this week I heard about a man named Clifton Williams. He was in a courtroom in Illinois, listening as his cousin was pleading guilty to a felony drug charge. Just as the judge was handing down his cousin's sentence, Clifton Williams stretched and let out a yawn.

The judge saw it and slapped him with contempt of court. And he gave him the maximum sentence for criminal contempt – 6 months in jail. For yawning. And there's no appeal at the level – the judge's word is final.

The reporter on the radio said Williams could probably cut that time way down if he just apologized to the judge. But Williams sounds more defiant than sorry. He sent his family a letter saying he couldn't believe he was sitting in the blankety blank jail for nothing.

When we feel we've been treated unfairly, everything within us rises up to fight for our right to justice. We want revenge, we want vindication. It's just plain wrong. And it is precisely in those moments when we need to remember Christ and his willingness to be wronged.

Over the years of meeting and counseling with people, I have to say this aspect of humility is probably the single most difficult truth for people to come to terms with. This is where Christ's example is hardest to follow. When there is hurt in a marriage or other relationship, this is often the stumbling block to healing, because nobody wants to back down. It doesn't feel good and it goes against all our instincts. There is no sense of satisfaction in giving up rights.

Certainly there are times when the wrongs that are done to you need to be called on the carpet and patterns of behavior need to be addressed and broken. That's really important. But I'm talking about pride here, pride that slips in after the wound and feels it deserves payback. All too often, we want to prove a point and not let the other person win. And that kills humility.

The ironic thing is, most of the time, when one person leads the way with humility, it softens the other person too, and the relationship can begin to heal. Just when we think we're giving up all the power, a different kind of power is unleashed. But it takes a step of faith to say, "I'm going to give up my right to be right, regardless of the response." That's the path Jesus took.

Not only did Jesus give up the right to be right, he also **gave up the right to be recognized**. Imagine what heaven must be like for Jesus. All the angels singing about you. Everyone bowing down in worship when they're in your presence. And that's how it should be. He's the Lord and maker of everything. He has a right to glory and honor and praise because of who he is and all he has done. Nobody could deserve it more.

But he stepped out of that environment and into one of total obscurity. Raised in a backwater town in a tiny, remote country. The nature of who he really was became completely undetectable.

Isaiah 53:2

*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

In other words, his humility meant giving up the glory he deserved and instead being ignored, passed over and even rejected by people.

I'm a big believer in recognizing people and their accomplishments. It's important to give credit where credit is due and honor people well. But seeking your own recognition goes against the nature of Christ's humility.

Which is too bad, because I really like being recognized. If I do something around the house, like clean up the kitchen or fold clothes, I can get a little irritated if Karin doesn't notice or say anything. I'd really like some kind of announcement over a loudspeaker: ATTENTION EVERYONE – JEFF PEABODY JUST DID A LOAD OF LAUNDRY!!

How sad is that? I want to be noticed for what a great servant I am, which is kind of contradicting itself. True humility never seeks to draw attention to itself.

Last month in Scotland, the golfer Tom Watson was poised to become the oldest champion ever of the oldest championship golf course. It was just two months before his 60th birthday, and the whole world was pulling for him to make history. But it wasn't to be. He lost. Christian columnist Richard Wilson recorded what happened:

He played so well. He clearly outplayed the field in the way he managed his game. No other player had a better score at the end of regulation play. Then age caught up with the old guy in the playoff that followed. But to the fans it mattered very little. Tom Watson performed like a champion in the eyes of all those who watched.

In the final moments of the tournament, Tom and his opponent walked together up the fairway toward the final green. The crowd's standing ovation expressed their appreciation and everyone knew the cheers were mostly for Tom. He might have let his pride prevail and share the moment of glory with the one to be crowned champion. But with the outcome clearly decided, Tom slowed his pace and allowed center stage to his opponent. There for all the world to see, he gave a lesson in humility.

Sometimes we wonder why good things can't happen when we see such a valiant effort. Sometimes it seems that the wrong champion wins the prize. But in losing, Tom Watson gave us a lesson that he could not have taught in the spotlight of victory.

Our Lord Jesus was another who accepted a humble defeat in place of the victory that was within his grasp. In defeat He was the light of the world.

Few of us will ever play on a stage as large as an international championship. But in our everyday lives, we all have chances to receive accolades that perhaps we even deserve. Those are times when we might allow our pride prevail, but when we choose to stand aside, we can make a greater difference in the world. Those are the times for a lesson in humility.

That's what Paul means when he talks about putting other people first – setting aside your own right to recognition to honor and celebrate them instead.

Christ emptied himself of these and many other rights. The right to choose his own way. The right to make people understand him. The right to live and not die. Instead he made himself nothing, and Paul says that's the same attitude we should have.

Jesus replaced the rights he laid down with some new things that he “took on.” First he **Took on a servant's mindset.** Paul says Jesus was,

*taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

It's the same “very nature” that described his being in “very nature” God. He became as much a servant as he was Lord.

Jenna Summerfield got married to Joel Lindberg yesterday, and when the best man gave the toast, he talked about the adjustment it was going to be for Jenna to get used to her new last name. He described it as going from her perfect movie star sounding name – Jenna Summerfield – to (yawn) Jenna Lindberg. Anytime you change something as personal as a name it takes a mental shift to go, “Oh yeah. That's who I am.”

When Jesus took on his new role as a human, it was more than just a physical change – it was a mindset. Instead of thinking of his eternal self, he had to think of himself in new terms – as a servant. And he did – he shifted his thinking to match his humanity. You can see it in how he talked about himself to his disciples:

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.

When you understand yourself in terms of a certain role, then the tasks of that job don't surprise you. A chef isn't caught off guard if asked to cook. A firefighter doesn't avoid putting out fires. And when you see yourself as a servant, you don't think about whether or not a job is beneath you, whether or not you're too busy or too uninterested. If it's your job to serve, then you serve. You're not doing someone an incredible favor – you're fulfilling your duty.

Does it surprise you to think of serving in some way? Having the mindset of a servant means putting my needs second to those I'm serving. Having the mindset of a servant means looking for ways to come to the assistance of my brothers and sisters. Having the mindset of a servant means intentionally taking the backseat

It is not easy to keep that mindset. And yet Paul said it is our thinking, our ATTITUDE that needs to be that of Christ. In another place, he put it this way:

Romans 12:3

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...

It requires regular mental work to maintain the proper mindset. What we think of ourselves shapes who we become. I have seen so many examples recently of people in our church who do this so well. The other day I was thanking someone for an act of service they had done for somebody else in the church, and they said, "Of course. We had to do it." There was no pride in that statement – it was just a recognition of who Christ has called all of us to be.

How do you think of yourself? Paul isn't only asking for that to change – he's asking us to change how we live. And this is the second thing Jesus did: **He took up a servant's actions.**

Paul says Jesus became obedient to the point of death. That's taking servanthood beyond an attitude and into flesh and blood reality. When the apostle John wrote to the church, he said

1 John 3:18-19

Dear children, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions.

Probably the clearest literal example Jesus gave of acting like a servant was on the evening of the Last Supper with his disciples. They were all sitting around when he suddenly got up, took off his outer robe, wrapped a towel around himself, knelt down and began washing their feet, one person at a time.

What a shock that must have been. Here this man they looked up to and respected with something close to awe, the man they had seen calm the wind and rain, the man who fed the 5,000 and healed the masses, the man whose teaching they barely understood – here he is down on his knees in front of them. gently caring for their dirty, smelly feet with ingrown toenails and corns and callouses.

Service is more than just lowly – it is incredibly personal. Servants have the closest of contact with their employers, knowing everything about them. You can't truly demonstrate humility from a distance – it comes in caring for someone as if they are better than you, even when you are seeing their flawed, ugly feet.

It's humbling to be on the other end too. Peter could hardly stand the thought of letting Jesus do what he did, until Christ convinced him how important it was. Getting to a point of saying, "Wash me, Lord" means saying, "I'll let you handle my ugly feet. I'll let you do what I'm embarrassed to accept from you." And that's perhaps the greatest lesson in humility.

Jesus interpreted his actions for his disciples afterwards.

John 13:12-17

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

If we claim to be Christians, humility is not just nice – it's necessary. We can't say we're following Jesus if we're not serving, because that's what he did. It was more than an example – it was a call. All who claim him as Lord must be willing to let go of pride the way he did.

Take a look at this painting by Siegel Koder. Jesus is so bent over and engrossed in washing Peter's feet that his head has entirely disappeared. It's just not there. All the focus is on what he's doing. But if you look closely at the water basin in the painting, you see the face of Jesus. It is reflecting up from down by Peter's feet.

Where will we most clearly see the face of Christ in our church? It will be in the humble acts of service that we do for one another.

Author J.M. Barrie once said that life is one long lesson in humility. What piece of the lesson is God showing you today?

Maybe you're needing that foundation of reassurance that you belong to Christ. You need that strong sense of identity. Maybe there are some things you've been having trouble giving up – the right to be right, or the right to be recognized. Or maybe you struggle with seeing yourself in servant terms, or actually doing anything for anybody else.

Seeing how far we have to go in humility is humbling in and of itself. And if I look too long at myself I will despair. Paul had it right: It's better to get caught up in Jesus instead, to bring him my dirty, unhumble fit and say, "wash me, Lord."