

INTRODUCTION

When you think of the Christian faith, what symbol comes to mind? Especially coming out of the Easter season, I expect many of us would say “**the cross.**” That makes sense--the cross has been *the* symbol of Christianity for over a thousand years. But that wasn’t always the case: early Christians greeted one another with a hand-sign of peace, and they used the ICHTHYS fish¹ as their symbol of choice. The cross wasn’t always a welcome symbol: for some, it was a “stumbling block”² to a Roman culture consumed by the pursuit of honor, status, and accomplishment. The Christian God had *lost* to the Roman empire when he died on a cross.

That all changed in the fourth century AD, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine, Constantine claimed to have received a vision from God in which he saw a “cross of light imposed over the sun” and heard “In this *sign*, you will conquer!”³ And so he did. Constantine nationalized Christianity, making it socially acceptable on the one hand while also watering down its radical, counter-cultural message. It became a weapon in the hand of the Empire: the cross was emblazoned on Roman shields and carried into battle, often the last image many would see before their sudden death at the end of a Roman blade.

The image of the cross continued to serve the interests of the powerful and violent. European Christians infamously “crusaded” into the Middle East⁴ wearing garments marked with a cross.⁵ They viewed themselves as participating in a “divine mission” to cleanse the “holy land” of “infidels.” In the eleventh century, these crusaders conquered Jerusalem in a bloody battle that did not spare women or children.⁶ These perversions of Christ’s cross aren’t all ancient--we know white supremacist terror groups use burning crosses as hate crimes against others.⁷

In the early years of the church, Paul and Jesus’ disciples--several of whom suffered their own crucifixions--taught that the cross represented an act of divine love, salvation, and *humility*. Over time, though, it mutated into a symbol of violence, hatred, and abusive power. In my opinion, this isn’t just a coincidence. Christ’s humble death is directly at odds with the way Satan and “the Powers” tempt humans to obtain power, prestige, safety, and control through means of coercion and violence. It should come as no surprise then Satan would seek to subvert and misuse the very symbol of the moment that mocked and upended his evil rule.⁸

¹ Jeff Benton, “[The cross was not always the symbol of Christianity.](#)” *Montgomery Advisor* (September 27, 2014).

² 1 Corinthians 1:23.

³ Eusebius Pamphilus, *The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*.

⁴ Mark Cartwright, “[Crusades](#)”, *World History Encyclopedia* (October 12, 2018).

⁵ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading*, p. 24.

⁶ August C. Krey, *The First Crusade, the Accounts of Eyewitnesses and Participants*, p. 280-281.

⁷ Robert A. Khan, “[Cross Burning](#)”, *The Free Speech Center: The First Amendment Encyclopedia* (2009).

⁸ Colossians 2:15.

I wonder, though, if we understand *why* the cross is so threatening to Satan and the Powers *in this present moment*. When you and I think about the cross, I think we think of it as a tool used by God to save us--an altar, where Jesus' blood was shed to pay the ransom due for our sins. That is all true, but it is also incomplete. The cross isn't just the means by which we are saved. The cross, and what Jesus did by embracing it, defines the very way we are called to *live out* the Christian faith as God's people. People of the resurrection must also always be people of the cross--walking the extra mile, turning the other cheek, loving their enemies, praying for their persecutors, and washing the feet of their betrayers. No one exemplified this better than Jesus, and he provided no greater example than his willing death on the cross. *That* is what Paul meant when he said the Corinthians that he "resolved to know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ, crucified."⁹ **The cross is supposed both the SOURCE and the SHAPE of our faith.**

Again, I think many of us understand the first part of that statement--that the cross is the source of our salvation--but struggle to grasp the latter--that Jesus' embrace of the cross should *shape* the way we live out our faith. What an apt time, then, to study what many scholars refer to as the "master story" of Paul's teaching and ministry: the "**Christ Hymn**" found in Philippians 2:5-11. Here, Paul presents how the sacrificial, self-emptying love of Jesus was powerful enough--in its weakness--to overcome death itself. And today, that same power lives in us.¹⁰

I. **UNITY: Philippians 1:27-2:4**

Before we get to the Christ hymn, I want us to remind ourselves of the hymn's context.

Recall that at the end of Philippians 1, and in the beginning of Philippians 2, Paul exhorts and instructs the Philippian Christians towards a unity based in Christ-like humility. Paul wants to see the Philippians (1) remember they are first and foremost citizens of God's Kingdom and face their shared persecution together as a unified community. Embracing suffering was radically countercultural--their surrounding culture was consumed by the pursuit of success and honor. Paul is confronting that never-ending chase, instructing the local church to embrace Christ's "cruciform" or cross-shaped posture--rejecting any motivation that comes from conceit or vanity, and instead treating the needs of others as of greater importance than their own.

Paul went to great lengths teaching what seems like a pretty straightforward teaching--"*if you want to be unified, you have to be humble*"--because he recognized how truly deceptive and insidious sin is. For Paul, confronting something as familiar as the Roman culture of honor-seeking would be like convincing a fish that water is wet. Paul knew that these cultural deceptions were undercutting the Philippian church's unity--its individual members had become so caught up in their own honor-seeking and comfort-chasing that they had forgotten the very life-giving, self-emptying practices that had welcomed them into the faith.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:20.

¹⁰ Romans 8:11

Recall that this emphasis on unity isn't just found in Philippians; it is a major theme of Paul's epistles. One scholar noted that for each time Paul speaks about salvation, there are 6-8 instances where he speaks about unity.¹¹ And concern for the unity of God's people spans the Bible; last time, we spent extended time reflecting upon four images of unity seen in the NT:

- In **John 17**, we saw Jesus pray for his future disciples to experience a kind of Christian unity, found in the Trinity, that would produce supernatural, inexplicable love and direct the attention of all creation back to its creator.
- In **1 Corinthians 12**, Paul taught that unity isn't uniformity, and that just as the body needs all of its limbs and organs, so too must a diverse Christian community embrace unity without denying difference.
- In **Ephesians 2**, Paul explained how Christ's death on the cross achieved "vertical" reconciliation between God and humanity, as well as a "horizontal" reconciliation that tore down the "dividing wall of hostility" between former enemies.
- And in **Revelation 7**, we saw the greatest communal act of worship and affirmation of God occurs because of, and not in spite of, the still-intact cultural and ethnic diversity of the worshipers, described as coming from every tribe, language, people, and nation.

Taken together, we can see that Christian unity is supposed to be **the proof of God's victory in Christ**. When we love and worship together as a diverse, reconciled community, we stand like a bright-lit billboard to the world¹² and the Powers,¹³ proclaiming publicly that Jesus' reign has broken through creation's sin-sick bondage and put down roots. Conversely, if we live individual and communal lives centered around selfish ambition or vain conceit, we hide our light under a bushel, rebuke Jesus's prayers, and reinforce Satan's grip over creation.

My challenge at the end of that prior sermon was toward two practical applications that we see in Paul: being both **prophetic** and **empathetic** by exhibiting grace and truth toward each other. Paul is both a deeply empathetic, patient, and caring guide as well as a confrontational, firm, and consistent truth-teller. For some of us at MACC, we need to move past our non-conformational preferences and speak plainly about the sinful history of American Christianity for the sake of the health and well-being of our brothers and sisters. For others at

¹¹ "One of the great paradoxes is that we have failed to emphasize Paul's teaching on the unity of the church...many passages in many letters are devoted to [salvation]. But, by comparison, his teaching on the unity of the church, and the work to make that unity a reality is an even greater theme. For every passage discussing justification by faith, there are 6 or 8 passages talking about the unity of the church." See N.T. Wright, "[Paul on the Unity of the Church: Session One](#)." November 2014.

¹² John 17.

¹³ Ephesians 3:10.

MACC, we need to be *much* quicker to listen and *much* slower to speak, mindful of the Christian teaching that *all* humans are capable of redemption, and aware that we should be willing to extend to others the same patience and empathy we have received time and time again.

The “secret ingredient” to both of these habits? Humility. Paul turns to Jesus to illustrate this.

II. VICTORY: Philippians 2:5-11

And as we turn to today’s passage--Philippians 2:5-11--I actually want to begin by returning to that declaration made by Paul in 1 Corinthians: “**I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ--that is, Jesus Christ crucified.**”¹⁴ This is a *remarkable statement*. When Paul says “to know” here, he doesn’t mean brain knowledge. He means something more like “to experience and live out in word and deed.”¹⁵ Paul is saying, essentially, that it is OK to reduce everything about his ministry to Jesus’ crucifixion! As he says elsewhere in his epistles, Paul sees in the Messiah’s brutal death both “the manifold power and wisdom of God.”¹⁶

Paul believes this fully aware that Jesus’ death contradicted the values of the surrounding culture. In that era, the power of one’s god was associated with its worldly success and the success of its followers--there was simply no room for the conception of a *crucified* god. The crucifixion also confounded Jewish leaders; Paul acknowledges this in his epistles when he says that his identification with a crucified Messiah left him and his ministry partners looking like “fools for the sake of Christ.”¹⁷ It was not even remotely conceivable to the Pharisees that the Messiah would suffer death at all, and certainly not the cursed “death on a tree” described in the writings of Moses.¹⁸ None of that stopped Paul from reconfiguring his own beliefs, though, seeing Jesus crucifixion as “becoming a curse” for us and redeeming creation in the process.¹⁹

Still, I think you can see why Paul spent so much time breaking down the importance of Christ’s death on the cross. How could Paul claim to follow the one true God while writing from a Roman jail cell, in chains, to an increasingly persecuted Philippian church? *Everything* the Philippians had ever been taught suggested they were on the losing side. This was a doubt-inducing, soul-shaking fear that prompted Paul to include the Christ hymn in the first place:

Cultivate this mindset in your community, which is a community in Christ Jesus, who, although being in the form of God, did not consider his equality with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage, but rather emptied himself by taking the form of a slave, that is, by being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a Roman

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:2.

¹⁵ Dr. Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Pauls’ Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, p. 1.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:24.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 4:10.

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 21:22-23.

¹⁹ Galatians 3:13.

*cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the title that is above every title, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, yes, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim, "Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, is the universal Lord," to the glory of God the Father.*²⁰

Examining the passage, scholars have noted the “v-shaped” trajectory of Jesus victory:

1. Jesus relinquishes his divine privileges and refusing to take advantage of them;
2. Jesus willingly descends into human suffering and embraces the Roman cross; and
3. *As a result* of his faithful suffering, Jesus is super-exalted as the Lord over all creation.

This is more than just some neat pattern spotted by some Bible nerds--it is a way of thinking and living that Paul is calling the Philippians to embrace. Note that Paul says in verse 5 that this “Christ Hymn” is intended to define the way the Philippians relate to one another. Said differently, when we faithfully deny ourselves and carry our crosses,²¹ we find ourselves “seated with Christ in the heavenlies.”²² This is the pattern of living that the Philippians apparently once knew and were blessed by, but have since abandoned or forgotten.

A. V-Shaped Victory: Jesus refusal to exploit his divine privilege (2:5-6).

Paul opens verse 5 with a statement about the Philippians’ perspective: “have toward one another the same attitude which was also in Christ Jesus.” What was this attitude? In many of your translations, Paul explains in verse 6 that Jesus didn’t consider his equality with God as “something to be **grasped**.” This is a very literal translation of the Greek--readers would have understood Paul to mean that Jesus didn’t consider his divine privileges something to be hoarded, exploited for selfish gain, or otherwise taken advantage of. That’s also why Paul’s uses the Greek word *hyparchon*, translated as “although” or “because” in verse 5.

Paul is saying that “*although* Jesus possessed divine power and privileges, he humbled himself.” Paul is emphasizing just *how counterintuitive* Jesus’ behavior was. After all, anyone with such immense power and privilege would obviously go about exploiting it for their own gain. No one just gives up privilege and power. Rulers of that era certainly did not--they openly set themselves apart from their subjects, shored up their authority, and shared it only with their direct descendants. And yet, even though Jesus possessed all the conceivable advantages of being God, he never considered his existence as God something to be hoarded and exploited. Instead, Jesus willingly gave up his heavenly position for the sake of his enemies.²³

²⁰ Translation offered by Dr. Michael Gorman.

²¹ Matthew 16:24-26.

²² Ephesians 2:6.

²³ Ephesians 2:13.

Unlike the way humans behave, exploiting whatever advantage we can, Jesus does the precise opposite. As one professor and friend of mine put it: Jesus “expended himself, pouring himself out like a drink offering, embarking on a downward trajectory that took him from the absolute cosmic heights to the lowest possible place.”²⁴ For Paul, Jesus’ loose-handed mentality towards privilege, status, and reputation was the exact antidote the Philippian church needed to cleanse the infectious deceptions stemming from the all-consuming Roman honor culture.

B. V-Shaped Victory: Jesus’ willing embrace of the Roman cross (2:7-8)

In verse 7, Paul begins charting Jesus’ humble descent, starting with Jesus’ transformation from the highest thinkable role to the lowest. And to be clear, Jesus isn’t divesting himself of divinity--he *is* fully God and fully man. The focus is instead on the transformation of his *position*: instead of being served, as he had every right to be, Jesus chose to become a servant of all. He became human in every way--he grew up, learned and acquired skills, hungered, thirsted, celebrated, wept, feared, and died just like any other person. This is why the author of Hebrews describes him as the “great high priest” able to sympathize with and understand our temptations and weaknesses, and why we can approach him knowing we will grace in our time of need.²⁵

In verse 8, Paul takes us even lower. “Having been found in the likeness of man,” Paul says, “Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a Roman cross.” The key observation here is that Jesus wasn’t humiliated by some outside force--he humbled himself. The Greek word *tapeinoo* translated here as “humbled” literally means “to lower vertically,” and Paul is using that word to show Jesus is the one who “self-lowered.”

Into what is Jesus lowering himself? “Death on a Roman cross.”²⁶ Our familiarity with the iconic crucifix limits our ability to see just how Paul’s emphasis on the Roman cross clashed with both the Roman and Jewish cultures that shaped the Philippian church.

- **Roman Culture** -- Crucifixion was first-century Rome’s most brutal and intimidating instrument of power and political control--described by the historian Josephus as “the most miserable of deaths”²⁷ and the historian Cicero as “the worst extreme of torture.”²⁸ All Roman subjects knew of “the terror of the cross.”²⁹ It was the Empire’s way of handling those who perceived to be a threat to *Pax Romana*: Rome’s “peace and security.” Crucified criminals were always hung publicly, and in that sense, death by crucifixion was death by humiliation. The idea that the one true God would be subjected to this kind of shame was ludicrous to a Roman.

²⁴ Dr. Timothy Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, p.42.

²⁵ Hebrews 4:15-16.

²⁶ Philippians 2:8.

²⁷ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.203.

²⁸ Cicero, *Against Verres*, 5.16.

²⁹ Cicero, *In Defense of Rabirius*, 5.16.

- **Jewish Culture** -- For the Jewish people, any person hung on a tree was considered cursed under the law.³⁰ It was also inconceivable to any Jew--whether unlearned or a Pharisee--that the long-promised Messiah would be anything other than overwhelmingly triumphant. So it was not only absurd, then, but *deeply offensive* for the early Christians--and Paul included!--to make a crucified political criminal and his cross the focus of their devotion and the paradigm for life in this world. This was the “stumbling block” and “foolishness” to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 1.

And yet, despite all of these cultural obstacles, Jesus embraces the cross. Paul describes Christ’s brave and humble conduct as both approved by and obedient to God the Father.³¹ This brings to mind Jesus’ posture in the Garden of Gethsemane, hours before his brutal death. “Abba, father, for you all things are possible. Please, remove this cup from me!” Jesus pleads. “Yet not what I want, but what you want.”³² Jesus’s accepts this cup of death--even death on a Roman cross--as an act of *messianic faithfulness*. He chooses the road of suffering, ridicule, and cruelty over privilege and comfort. As Christian communities today, when we embrace behaviors that the world may consider foolish, or humiliating, we become like dry riverbeds³³ through which the power of God can course--the same divine power that resurrected Jesus, cleansed the world, and made a mockery of the Powers.³⁴

C. V-Shaped Victory: Jesus super-exaltation (2:9-11)

Having seen Jesus self-lowered to the deepest depths one can go--down from the highest of heights one could begin--note how Paul describes the Father’s response to his Son’s humble faithfulness! This is where the trajectory of the Christ Hymn turns back up--even though the cross *should* have been the end of the story. It is precisely *because* Jesus refused to exploit his privileges, and because he utterly spent himself on behalf of us in faithfulness to God, that the Father responds by “exalting Jesus to the highest place.”³⁵

Paul chose his words very carefully throughout Philippians, including in this instance. The word translated “exalted” here is actually a combination of two Greek words--*hyper* (high) and *hupsoo* (exalt)--into a single verb: *hyperupsoo*. This new, combined verb literally means to “super-exalt” or to lift someone up to the highest possible position. That means when Jesus is “lifted” up on the Roman cross for the purpose of public shaming and humiliation, his Father responds by receiving and embracing him with love and approval, declaring that he is “well-pleased,”³⁶ and

³⁰ Deuteronomy 21:23.

³¹ See Philippians 1:2 and 4:20, as well as 2:11, where we see a clear link between Jesus’ conduct and God’s approval.

³² Mark 14:35-36.

³³ A metaphor created originally by Swiss theologian Karl Barth.

³⁴ Colossians 2:15.

³⁵ Philippians 2:9.

³⁶ Matthew 3:17.

even giving him the Father's own name. In a very real sense, Paul is saying that God is overruling Rome's damnation of Jesus by vindicating him and honoring him with the very same heavenly status that Jesus had gladly relinquished.

At this super-exaltation, Paul says, *every* knee will bow--in heaven, on earth, and under the earth--making this a cosmic, creation-wide victory. This is the beginning of what Jesus describes in the gospel of Matthew as "the renewal of all things."³⁷ This is the vision of hope we read about in Isaiah, where the "ends of the earth" turn back to God and declare that "only in the Lord are just deeds and power" and "only in the Lord shall there be vindication."³⁸ It is the first fruits of the "new heavens and new earth" promised in Revelation.³⁹ And we know that at that fulfillment of this great redeeming work, when all wrongs are righted, when death itself is defeated by the lamb who was slain, every created being will worship God.⁴⁰ Even the angels and demons will bow before the crucified one--this is what Paul says at the end of the Christ hymn: "every tongue will confess Jesus Christ is Lord!"

Now, *why* has this all occurred? How is it that Jesus manages to completely upend the cosmic power structure? How did he become "super-exalted"? Not in spite of the cross, but precisely ***because of the cross***. It is because he was fully obedient, faithful, long-suffering, and *humble*.

II. HUMILITY: Paul as a Case Study in Cruciformity

From here, we must ask ourselves: how do we respond to Paul's instruction and begin to behave in a way that reflects the Christ Hymn? As with our sermon on unity, I think we can begin with Paul himself. Even as Paul modeled the balance of grace and truth that's needed for Christian unity, he is also in my opinion an excellent case study in practicing ***cruciformity***.⁴¹

This term "cruciformity" simply means "the shape of the cross."⁴² It is a way of summing up the Christ Hymn into a single word, a way of talking about Jesus' refusal to take advantage of all his privileges and instead empty himself to restore and unify creation. And as we see in Jesus, God makes his strength perfect in this pattern of cruciform weakness.⁴³ Cruciformity, then, is the way of thinking that forced Paul to reorient his life.

Now, don't rush past that! I think it is very difficult for us to imagine just how much this upside-down way of thinking wrecked Paul's entire belief system and identity. Prior to his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul would have been baffled at best, or

³⁷ Matthew 19:28-30.

³⁸ Isaiah 45:22-25.

³⁹ Revelation 21:1-8.

⁴⁰ Revelation 7:9-12.

⁴¹ Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, p. 9-29.

⁴² Gorman, *Cruciformity*, p. 2.

⁴³ 2 Corinthians 12:8-10.

infuriated at worst, by Jesus' ministry. "How on earth would loving enemies bring about resurrection?" Paul may have asked. "How would praying for the Romans do any good? And how would welcoming sinners, or eating with outcasts, ever get them to repent and be Torah-observant?" To engage in some more sanctified speculation, Paul might have even felt some sense of satisfaction or relief when learning of Jesus' death. "Serves him right," Paul may have scoffed. "What an irresponsible, unrealistic, and foolish teacher."⁴⁴ Paul, as a high ranking Pharisee, was consumed with doing whatever it took to restore the holiness of God's people and bring about their long-promised resurrection and restoration. Jesus, a false prophet, had hindered that mission, and his death meant one less obstacle to doing God's work.

That was Paul's view, at least, until his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus in the book of Acts. Even while he was "still breathing threats and murder against disciples of the Lord"⁴⁵ and while on his way to engage in even more violent persecution of Christians, Jesus appears to Paul in a flash of light. Paul, then called Saul, is left blind. It is only after three days, and the risky hospitality of two Christians, that Paul is able to see again. God later declares that the newly-named Paul shall be "an instrument" to bring God's name to the world.⁴⁶ And in accomplishing that mission, Paul would learn "how much he must suffer" for God's name.⁴⁷ Paul hadn't just been blinded physically; he realized that his entire ministry had been blind to the supernatural truth that the crucified, suffering, "cursed" Jesus was king, and that he was being called to suffer alongside him.

This changed *everything* for Paul. What we often overlook is that Paul realizes that his coercive, violent, and forceful ministry methods--along with his pursuit of titles and prestige to highlight his holiness--had set him in opposition to God. He had become so consumed with preserving the holiness of God's people, and so concerned with conjuring it up in himself, that he had justified an idolatry of power and prestige that led to him engaging in deadly persecution. He saw himself as an agent of resurrection, when he was in fact an instrument of death! The long-awaited resurrection *had already arrived* in Jesus, and it was springing up in the very communities of Christians he was trying to stamp out of existence. Paul began to realize that if God's people wanted to continue to experience that resurrection power, they needed to abandon methods of coercion and adopt *cruciform* patterns and habits so they might "suffer" as Jesus had. And as a result, **both his teaching and his ministry methods became cruciform, or cross-shaped.**

- **Paul's Teaching** -- Paul specifically uses the term *stauros*, translated "cross", in more than half of his epistles.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, no other New Testament author uses the same

⁴⁴ Tim Gombis, "[Faith Improvised: The Conversion of Paul's Ministry Imagination](#)," March 16, 2021.

⁴⁵ Acts 9:9.

⁴⁶ Acts 9:15.

⁴⁷ Acts 9:16.

⁴⁸ See 1 Corinthians 1:17; Galatians 5:11, 6:12-14; Ephesians 2:16; Philippians 2:5-11; Philemon 3:18; Colossians 1:20, 2:14. Hebrews also speaks of the cross in 12:2, though most scholars no longer widely consider Hebrews one of Paul's writings.

term outside of the gospel accounts. This shows just how Paul's preaching of the cross was unique to him. In Galatians, Paul rejects any glory "except in the cross of Jesus Christ, by which the world is crucified to me, and I to the world."⁴⁹ "To the world," he says, "the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."⁵⁰

But Paul's teaching on *cruciform* living--a lifestyle that embraced Christ's humility--went beyond those specific references of the word "cross." Paul was a master of linking the cross and its implications to the everyday practices and lives of his Kingdom siblings. Paul helped the Corinthians recapture a righteous perspective on communion by framing it as a way to "proclaim Jesus's death until he comes."⁵¹ In Ephesians, Paul speaks of how Jesus' death on the cross empowered his disciples to reconcile and love across differences, even if--as Jews and Greeks--they had previously been generational enemies.⁵² Paul urged his readers to embrace their weaknesses--disciples of Jesus were "treasures in jars of clay" who revealed the "surpassing power of God" when "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; persecuted, but not abandoned; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."⁵³ Paul knew the suffering that Christians endured, and the temptation from the culture around them to abandon that suffering for status and comfort. His constant concern was that God's people would forget the very habits that Jesus had modeled--he knew and had seen that when God's people forget Jesus crucified, trouble follows swiftly.

- **Paul's Ministry** -- Paul didn't just talk this talk, though. He walked it. And under the shadow of the cross, Paul's entire outlook on his life transformed. Remember, prior to encountering Jesus, Paul had centered his whole identity on his prestige, accolades, and bloodline. He describes himself as properly circumcised, a descendant from the tribe of Benjamin, a prominent student of the widely-respected Gamaliel, a zealous Pharisee, blameless under the law, and a "Hebrew of the Hebrews"--spotless in his theology and Jewish heritage.⁵⁴ Paul had previously believed sinners were standing in the way of God saving Israel--sinners, tax collectors, Roman collaborators, the sexually promiscuous were all preventing God from pouring out resurrection life on creation.⁵⁵ And Jesus was a kind of "ultimate sinner," cursed by God to hang on a tree and die.⁵⁶

But, after his encounter with a crucified and resurrected Jesus, Paul's entire ministry and religious identity was wrecked and rebuilt. Once the persecutor of "sinners," Paul began

⁴⁹ Galatians 6:14

⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:18.

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 11:26.

⁵² Ephesians 2:16.

⁵³ 2 Corinthians 4:7-9.

⁵⁴ Philippians 3:5-6

⁵⁵ Gombis, *Power in Weakness*, p. 50.

⁵⁶ Deuteronomy 21:23.

to refer to himself as the “foremost of all sinners.”⁵⁷ Once proud of his hard-fought accomplishments, Paul considered them as nothing but “rubbish.”⁵⁸ Once proud of his identity as an especially accomplished Pharisee, Paul arranged himself as a partner or fellow servant with Timothy, Epaphroditus, and others.⁵⁹ Paul didn’t immediately embrace all of this pain and status-relinquishment--when he pleaded for deliverance from the suffering he endured as an apostle of the crucified Lord, Jesus replied: “my grace is sufficient for you, and my strength is made perfect in your weakness.”⁶⁰ Yes, this was probably maddening to Paul, who described one such suffering as an unrelenting “messenger from Satan” that felt like a “thorn in his flesh” he couldn’t remove.⁶¹ And yet, Paul declares: “If I must boast, I will boast only of the things that show my weakness.”⁶² “For Christ’s sake, I am *content* with my weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”⁶³

III. IDOLATRY: the Threat to Cruciform Unity

When confronted with the cross, Paul chooses to embrace it. But what is the danger if we get this wrong? What is the harm if we as a Christian community tip-toe around Paul’s example, compromise for comfort’s sake, and give in to the temptation to become another well-meaning community more concerned about our needs, comfort, and influence? What if we seek to make our own strength perfect, rather than allow God’s strength to be made perfect in our weakness?⁶⁴

In my opinion, our gospel witness would be fundamentally compromised. **Simply put, it would become idolatry.**

We know this because the early church saw it. They saw it in the intersectional strife Paul had to confront in nearly every epistle--Jews and Greeks, slave and free, men and women.⁶⁵ They saw it in the Jerusalem church’s embrace of blatant favoritism toward the wealthy and honorable while ignoring the poor and downtrodden.⁶⁶ They witnessed it in Christian brothers and sisters who hoarded their resources and shrouded their covetousness in lies.⁶⁷ And they saw it in rich Christians gorging themselves at the communion table, leaving scraps for their poorer Christian siblings.⁶⁸ In each of those instances, early Christian communities **exchanged the cruciform**

⁵⁷ 1 Timothy 1:15.

⁵⁸ Philippians 3:8-9.

⁵⁹ Philippians 2:19-24.

⁶⁰ 2 Corinthians 12:9.

⁶¹ 2 Corinthians 12:7

⁶² 2 Corinthians 11:30.

⁶³ 2 Corinthians 12:10.

⁶⁴ 2 Corinthians 12.

⁶⁵ Galatians 3, 1 Corinthians 11, Ephesians 2, Romans 13, etc.

⁶⁶ James 2:1-7.

⁶⁷ Acts 5:1-11.

⁶⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:17-33.

pattern of Jesus' humility for the corrupting idolatry of power. And God took those matters seriously, to the point that he killed some of the rich Corinthian gluttons as well as Ananias and Sapphira. When God's wrath is conjured to the point that he's striking down his own people, we should pause and take notice!

Now, I am using the word "idolatry" here very much on purpose. In scripture, idolatry isn't merely bowing down to sacrilegious stones. **Idolatry involves God's people identifying a good goal that God wants for them, but then being seduced into an easier way to get it.** Consider several examples:

- **The Hebrews & Control** -- Upon returning to the edges of the Promised Land, Moses and later Joshua repeat this seemingly bizarre command to avoid treaties with neighboring nations.⁶⁹ Why? Treaties were a common way to conduct international relations, to get some assurance of protection. But God didn't want that--he had always wanted his people in a place of weakness. God wanted Israel vulnerable, trusting only in him, having no leverage or power over their neighbors. And of course, what do the Hebrews do as soon as they arrive? They make treaties.⁷⁰ "How else will we be safe?" they pleaded. How quickly the Hebrews gave up on the way of weakness for practicality, a practicality that leads to them worshipping other gods outright. They are a reminder to us that "*how else?*" questions are a dangerous foundation upon which to build our faith.
- **Peter & Power** -- Jesus also faced the temptation of idolatry. In the synoptic gospels,⁷¹ Jesus faces Satanic temptation in the wilderness. In the Matthew and Luke accounts, Satan never tempts Jesus *not* to be the son of God--he tempts him to get there quicker, *bypassing the cross*. Satan tempts Jesus to attain his "super-exaltation" through spectacle and power, but Jesus rebukes those temptations.⁷² Later, in Mark 8--a passage Pastor Leon mentioned during his Easter sermon--we see this Satanic temptation rise up again unexpectedly. After Peter identifies Jesus as the Christ,⁷³ Jesus explains to his disciples that he, the Messiah, will go to the capital city of Jerusalem to die, even though his people are being persecuted, even though everyone is clamoring for him to rise up, and even though his disciples have been expecting to bring the Kingdom of God to creation once and for all.⁷⁴ Peter, who had *just identified* Jesus as God incarnate, takes Jesus to the side and *rebukes* him. And in one of the rare moments where Mark's gospel actually slows down, Jesus turns, looks at his disciples, and offers his own rebuke to Peter: "get behind me"--meaning, get back to being my

⁶⁹ Deuteronomy 7:3, Joshua 23:12.

⁷⁰ Joshua 1-2.

⁷¹ Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13.

⁷² Some scholars believe that these accounts suggest that this may have been more than a one-time event, that Jesus was routinely tempted throughout his ministry to avoid the way of the cross.

⁷³ Mark 9:29.

⁷⁴ Mark 9:31-33.

disciple--"Satan!" Jesus isn't tweaking Peter's approach; he condemns it as Satanic temptation to avoid the cross. For Jesus, the easier way of power is **Satanic**.

- **Paul & Prestige** -- Of course, Paul himself wasn't immune to temptations of idolatry. As we have already seen, Paul rearranged his whole Christian ministry away from the the pursuit of power and prestige and towards weakness and humility.⁷⁵ Perhaps Paul became so consumed with preaching a crucified Messiah, and urging the church towards humility, because he had been swept into and deceived by that same idolatry.

Family, if we can agree that humility is the secret ingredient to godly Christian character and virtue, then I think we must also acknowledge that the lust for power and control is the toxic root at the base of almost all sin. If you take an honest look at your sin, and our collective sins, I think you will be hard pressed to find one that can't be traced back to an anti-humility idolatry--some kind of shortcut prioritizing an "easier way" to get an otherwise good thing.

V. CONCLUSION

In the gospels, Jesus declares that "whoever humbles himself like a child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."⁷⁶ "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he teaches in his first Beatitude, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If we want to become great, our Savior explains, we "must become a servant of all," just like him.⁷⁷ This is the message of the "Christ Hymn": whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Jesus's sake will find it.⁷⁸

Both Jesus and Paul are making something clear to us: true power, true exaltation, comes by way of genuine, cross-shaped humility. This is the defining feature of a Christ follower. And if we want to have a compelling testimony, as Paul speaks to in next week's passage, we have to embrace the supernatural humility of Christ that will, like him, lead the Father to exalt us into heavens so that we might "shine like stars."⁷⁹

But let's be clear: few make Paul's choice. Consider another famous Pharisee in the New Testament: **Nicodemus**. Like Paul, he was a prestigious, well-educated, and highly regarded among the Pharisees. And like Paul, he came face to face with Jesus in the famous John 3:16 passage. How does he respond in that interaction? Let's watch this clip from *The Chosen*.⁸⁰

This show captures the deep divide in Nicodemus' heart. On the one hand, he is being confronted by one who appears to be God's emissary, a great prophet, perhaps even the

⁷⁵ Philippians 3:5-9.

⁷⁶ Matthew 18:4.

⁷⁷ Matthew 20:26-28.

⁷⁸ Matthew 16:25.

⁷⁹ Philippians 2:15.

⁸⁰ "[The Chosen Scene: John 3.16](#)" (from 7:12 until 9:36).

Messiah himself. It is the fulfillment of all he has longed for! And yet, on the other hand, Nicodemus can't fathom leaving his curated and successful life--his comfort, status, social role, and family--to follow an unknown and dangerous man alongside a collection of outcasts and sinners. What does Nicodemus ultimately decide to do? It is revealed in the very next episode.⁸¹

This portrayal of Nicodemus' despair is riveting and convicting. Many of us are like him--we know more than most about God's ways, and we also have much to lose by loving him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. To that end, I would like to offer you three final exhortations:

[1] To the weary: Jesus identifies with you! -- I want to be clear: this sermon is *not* a call to "doormat humility." I fully recognize how it could seem that way, especially for those who have suffered greatly and continue to suffer. Humility won't look the same for all of us: Christian unity *isn't* uniformity. I invite you to hear the words of Esau McCaulley as he describes the hope the Black Church has found in Christ's suffering, particularly how it is portrayed in Philippians 2:

"On this side of the passion and resurrection, Black anger and pain is answered personally, by the truly human one. We have found solace in the fact that God responds to Black suffering with a profound act of identification with our suffering...What is God's first answer to Black suffering, and the wider human suffering and rage that comes along with it? It is to enter that suffering alongside us as a friend and redeemer. The answer to Black rage is the calming words of the Word made flesh. The incarnation that comes all the way down, even unto death, has been enough for us to say, 'yes, God' we trust you.' We have decided to trust God because he knows what it means to be at the mercy of a corrupt state that cares little for human rights."

Are you discouraged? Weary? Your hope isn't only for the future. The promise of the cross is deliverance out of the *present* evil age and into God's Kingdom *right now*.⁸² In that Kingdom, there is a radical reshuffling of social locations--where the first are last and the last are first,⁸³ and where we are all reconciled as siblings in Christ.⁸⁴ Whatever suffering you face, Jesus can give you the eyes to see it as a "light and momentary affliction," yes, but you must also understand that when God asks you to follow him--even into the unknown, or into trials and tribulations--he is there with you, and he identified with *your* hardship and suffering on *his* cross.

[2] To the confident: examine your faith with "fear and trembling." -- Take note of the very next verse in Philippians 2 following the Christ Hymn. Paul's word to the Philippians, caught up in their pursuit of status and prestige, is to "examine their faith with fear and trembling."⁸⁵ On the one hand, this is a pretty clear warning against the destructive outcome that is promised to

⁸¹ ["The Chosen Season One: Episodes 7 & 8"](#) (from 1:30:15 to 1:31:35).

⁸² Colossians 1:13.

⁸³ Matthew 20:16.

⁸⁴ Romans 12:10.

⁸⁵ Philippians 2:12.

those who spend their life obtaining power and comfort in the present life. But on the other hand, and perhaps less clear, it is an echo of Paul's description of himself in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

*"When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom...for I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, crucified. I came to you in weakness, **with great fear and trembling**. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power."⁸⁶*

Are you confident and sure of yourself, certain you have, or maybe need to have, all of the answers? Or are you unwilling to relinquish control due to your fears? Friend, ministry and life in the shape of the cross is the only way to unleash the power of the resurrection life of Jesus. We must embrace and confront, not hide from, our limits and weaknesses. As Paul says, "we always carry around in our bodies the *death* of Jesus, so that way the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our bodies."⁸⁷ Examine your faith "with fear and trembling" and consider from where you confidence--or your fear and need for control--comes from.

[3] To all of us: run the race with endurance. -- On a recent morning run with several guys at MACC, one of the runners thanked us for joining him. He said that, but for the encouragement and accountability of tackling the run together, he would have quit if he had tried to keep the and complete the distance we had traveled. And in the end, the run was fun! Family, don't give up. Not when you are surrounded by your brothers and sisters. Paul's repeated emphasis on humility, and on embracing the way of the cross, is the *basis* for the equally prominent theme in his letter to the Philippians: JOY!

If we want to experience the "joy of the Lord that is our strength"⁸⁸ then let us fix our eyes not on the trials and challenges we will inevitably face as we are misunderstood, as we "lose" in the world's eyes, as we choose the hospitable and merciful route in response to our enemies, and as we give up power and prestige and control and comfort. Let us instead "fix our eyes on Jesus, **who for the JOY that was set before him endured the cross, despised the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.**"⁸⁹

Amen.

⁸⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

⁸⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:10.

⁸⁸ Nehemiah 8:10.

⁸⁹ Hebrews 12:2.