

“Engaging in the Cruciform Life”

Luke 9:23-25; Philippians 2:1-11

May our lives be shaped by and in the cross of Christ.

Let’s start with “cruciform,” as it is not a word we hear very often, but it is a powerful lens through which to see the truth of God and the life to which we are called. The following, from noted Pauline scholar Michael Gorman, will be helpful:



The inseparable interconnections of Father, Son, and Spirit in Paul’s experience lead to (or perhaps derive from) an important, and distinctively Pauline, claim: that God is cruciform, or crosslike. That is, we learn from Paul that the cross of Christ is not only initiated by God, but it also reveals God. Christ crucified is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:18–25); God’s actions reveal God’s character. The revelatory character of the cross means that when we see it we are shown something not only about Christ but about God; we discover that God is vulnerable, powerful in weakness. We discover that God is faithful and loving beyond measure, even toward enemies (Rom 5:6–8).

Furthermore, the revelatory character of the cross means that we are shown something not only about the ‘historical Jesus’ but also about the living Lord, and therefore about the Spirit. We discover that the same Jesus who went to the cross in faith and love (Gal 2:15–21) continues by the Spirit to create a community of cross-shaped faith and love (5:6, esp. in light of 2:19–20).¹

And the place to begin understanding “cross-shaped faith and love” is in Philippians 2:1-11.

A cruciform mind and heart

Paul cared deeply for each church that he started and, surely, he hoped that they felt the same way towards him. In his letter to the Philippian Christians, he told them flat out what would make him happy – “Have the same thoughts, share the same love, be of one soul and mind . . . don’t do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourself . . . look out for one another’s interests, not just your own” (from the *Good News Bible*). This is what would make Paul happy, make his own joy complete. He didn’t want the Philippians’ praise or their money – only that they would humbly love one another.

Sometimes the Bible challenges our understanding – but not here. There is nothing confusing or ambiguous in Paul’s words. The challenge lies not in the understanding, but in the doing. We are called to lives of selflessness and sacrifice. Not only are we to “do unto others as they do unto us,” we are to put all others – everyone – ahead of ourselves. Indeed, this is the very meaning of love in the New Testament. True love is not merely a feeling, it is action. Love is not abstract; it is concrete. God loved so much that he gave his only Son to die on a Roman cross. It is in the shadow of the cross that we learn about love: love is sacrifice and self-giving.

¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 144.

It is putting others ahead of ourselves. It is the practice of humility – even in the midst of our ambitions.

Humble Ambition

The typical Philippian Christian hearing Paul's letter read aloud² was probably a farmer or herder, or perhaps a simple merchant, tradesman, or homemaker. Their ambitions might have been to add a few sheep to their flock or sell a few more tunics in the market. We live in a far different world. Many of our life ambitions are played out in organizations. The large for-profit and not-for-profit organizations for which many of us work simply did not exist in the first century. We live in the Age of the Organization – and it is only little more than 150 years old.

In some ways, our challenges exceed those faced by the Philippians. Most of us do not work in isolation or even amongst just a few trusted friends. Rather, whether we are working with others to build machines, instruct third-graders, or care for the ill, many of us must manage countless relationships every day. We have ample opportunities “to push our way to the front” or “sweet-talk our way to the top” rather than to “put ourselves aside and help others get ahead.”³ Indeed, such words hardly even seem to make sense in the context of the many modern workplaces. But we are followers of Jesus, seeking to be ever-better disciples. We seek to do as our Master did. We don't get to pick and choose among our relationships – as if we are called to be humble, selfless, and Christlike with some people, but not others, at home, but not at work. Paul calls us to put the interests of others ahead of our own so that we may find the joy we seek.

A Christ-hymn

After urging the Philippians to always put the interests of others ahead of their own, in v.5 Paul tells the Philippians, “. . . let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Peterson renders it this way: “Think of yourselves the same way Christ Jesus thought of himself.” So, the obvious question is -- how did Jesus think of himself?

Paul answers this question by using the glorious Christ-hymn of v. 6-11. That it is a hymn, sung or not, is widely accepted. Thus, it gives us a peek into the proclamations about Jesus that were made by some of the earliest Christians. Whether Paul composed it or simply used it in his letter, this hymn, this “Christ-hymn,” was written before any of the gospels.

Philippians is filled with Paul's teachings about how the disciples of Jesus Christ are to live – be selfless, stay humble, pray about everything, be content in all things, think about what is true and good and honorable and excellent, and so on. Yet, in this Christ-hymn there seems to be no moral teachings at all, no “do's and don'ts.” We are ready for Paul to tell us why we ought to be selfless – and all we get is verse after verse of theology. Jesus was “in the form of God” . . . Jesus “emptied himself” . . . Jesus was “found in human form” . . . all this theology. But this is Paul's way. When Christians brought Paul a practical question, he was likely to give them a theological answer. The Corinthians came to Paul with questions about eating meat sacrificed

² In the first century, only about 5-10% of people were literate. Even in the cities, it wasn't more than 15%. Thus, Paul's letters were read aloud to Christians when they gathered in homes for worship and fellowship.

³ These phrases are all from Peterson's rendering of verse 3 in his paraphrase of Philippians in *The Message*.

to pagan idols – and he began his answer with this “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:9). Paul understood that we cannot separate what we believe from what we do. He forces us to hold together our theology and our morality. We seek the truth about God and ourselves, but always in the service of discipleship. So, after calling the Philippians to selflessness, Paul reminds them of Christ’s selflessness and all that he willingly surrendered for us.

Surrendering our rights . . . and gaining it all

With the passing of each decade, we Americans seem more and more consumed with our rights. Sometimes, I think we’ve about convinced ourselves that we have the inherent right to do whatever we want. Still, Jesus certainly enjoyed rights and privileges that you and I could not imagine. He was God . . . existing from God’s beginning . . . equal with God . . . all-knowing . . . all-Good – however, we might choose to phrase it, Jesus had it all! But he gave it all up. He didn’t cling to his inherent rights and privileges, he instead “emptied” himself, taking on the “form of a slave . . . in human likeness.” He gave up the privileges of God so that he might be obedient – obedient all the way to an excruciating and humiliating death on a Roman cross. Sometimes, Christians get off track with this. We get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of “form” or “emptying,” wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus’ surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not Paul’s point. As Morna Hooker wrote, “Christ did not cease to be in the ‘form of God’ when he took the form of a slave, any more than he ceased to be the ‘Son of God’ when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.” God is love (1 John 4:16b). Love is selfless sacrifice. How do we know this? Because “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). If we want to know what God is like, we can look to Jesus. If we want to know what love is like, we can look to the cross.

How does God respond to Jesus’ “obedience to the point of death – even death on a cross”? God does so triumphantly, exalting Jesus above all others. Jesus is Lord. It is he to whom “every knee should bend” and “every tongue confess.” Using these stirring words of worship from Isaiah (45:23), Paul points us toward Jesus as the image of the one true God, whose self-sacrifice embodies the meaning of true love. Jesus is to be worshiped. His example urges us toward loving sacrifices of our own. We are not to cling to our rights and privileges; we are to surrender them for the sake of others. For, this is what God is like . . . and we too are made in God’s image.