

“Empty” part 2

Psalm 4; Philippians 2:1-12

February 7, 2022 – Scout Sunday

“Attitude is everything!” I was fortunate enough to have a middle school gym coach that was very inspiring. His name is Rick Stack and, believe it or not, the guy was still coaching wrestling at Ashbrook High a few years back when we last connected. Just an all-around good guy and a great coach, Mr. Stack kept us moving, laughing and learning in those dark days of Middle School. But he had one expression, I imagine he still uses it today but I’m not sure. The expression? Attitude is everything, of course.

And isn’t that right? Haven’t you found that that bit of wisdom colors much of this thing called life? Attitude may not be everything, God is, but it does have an outsized impact on your perspective as well as your performance, doesn’t it? I can remember occasions when I was working in the service industry. Like, a day at Starbucks can go really, really well if you’re in the right head space. If, on the other hand, you’re not, even making someone a simple cup of coffee can ruffle your feathers the wrong way.

“Attitude is everything” as Coach Stack used to say. And although I never did quite get into the right mind place to enjoy running a mile for time, I did learn that if I could keep things in a positive perspective, events always seem to go much, much smoother.

There are two levels on which we can understand this passage. First of all, we cannot help but see the powerful doctrinal truth. There is tremendous Christological significance in this passage. It gives us remarkable insight into the nature and work of Christ. It tells us of His equality with God and of His coexistent humanity. How He is 100 percent God and 100 percent man, all at the same time. It tells us of His obedience to the will of the Father and how He died on the cross. But it also tells us of His ultimate exaltation, how every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. But secondly, and just as important, is the contextual message which is extremely practical. We must see this section of Scripture in context with the surrounding Scriptures. We must see it within the context of the book as a whole and the overall argument Paul is making to the Church at Philippi. Paul is writing to them to instruct them on how they are to live. This is very practical. It is not, then, primarily a text about the theology surrounding Jesus, but it is a passage from a letter to a church, giving them Jesus as their example. It tells them that by following His example they can successfully live the Christian life. It sets forth Jesus, who was and is God, as the supreme example. It is He who we are to follow; it is His actions we are to emulate.

And that’s exactly what Paul is talking about in the first portion of our reading this morning. Last week, we dealt with the second half of this passage. Necessary, really, to make sense of this first part. While the second half of our reading is a deep and thrilling theological understanding of Christ’s amazing humility – not counting equality with God as something to be exploited is a big, big deal after all. Can you imagine having the power of God and NOT using it to benefit yourself? I mean, give me the power of God and the Braves and the Tarheels and the Panthers are winning everything that matters for eternity! But what Paul tells the Philippian church is that Jesus was so set and determined to bring about God’s Will that he DIDN’T exploit His divinity. Instead, He chose to use His divine power to fashion Himself a better, more able servant to others. This powerful example is then brought to bear as Paul commits to telling the Philippians how to live their lives. The passage begins back in the previous chapter. There, Paul announces his intentions by saying in chapter 1, verses 27 and 28 a – **Philippians 1:27-28a** – “*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.*” What Paul is suggesting is that life can be lived well and in a Christian manner under adverse circumstances. That’s good news, isn’t it?

There are lots of books on that, you know. Just amble down to any local bookseller and there you’ll find all sorts of people willing to sell you their insights on how to best live your life. Books like “Flow,” and “How to Stop Worrying and Start Living” all purport to tell you how to live your life under any and all circumstances such that you’ll be master and commander of your own destiny. And I confess, I’m not really a student of this kind of book so I can’t report with certainty as to what’s in them. But I just can’t imagine the advice is any more helpful, any more uplifting or inspiring, that what the Word has here for us in Philippians. And notice how the chapter begins, **Philippians 2:1-2** – “*So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love,*

any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

Sometimes we think servanthood is what we do once we’ve gotten our jobs done and we’ve taken care of ourselves and our families. But what Paul is announcing here is that servanthood is an ongoing choice. One that was made by the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ. He was willing to choose service to the world over against His own comfort and privilege.

Now, you would think, this would be an ongoing annoyance. I mean, to prioritize service under any and every situation is one that is bound to create difficulties in this life. But it is, conversely, also the pathway to great peace and overwhelming joy. Servanthood is our jam, so to speak. Think now, for a moment, about some of the happiest people in your life? Who are they? Are they the people who are always out looking out for number one, so to speak? Are the most contented people in your life the richest or the most self-focused?

Well, I can’t speak for you but it has been my personal experience as well as observed, that when anyone is living their lives primarily for themselves, what they encounter is not so much happiness, but misery. It just seems to be the case that, whenever we’re looking out for number one, number two ends up being our destiny. I’ll never forget how much I wanted a particular video game when I was a kid. Man, I thought if I didn’t get Pac-Man for the Atari 2600 on the day it was released, my life would be officially over. So, I pleaded and begged and finally, my dad agreed to take me to the Target at like 8am in the morning to wait in line to get one.

I had pestered and begged and pleaded and cajoled to get my way and there we were, in line. Guess what? They ran out before I was able to get a copy. Since I’m here, I think it’s safe to say not getting it opening day didn’t kill me. But it did lead to me being mean spirited and obnoxious. You see, when we set out entirely for ourselves, when we don’t get what we want, we tend to be surly to others around us.

I am a big fan of the Scouts. Now, as anybody can tell you based on my stunning lack of ability with mechanical things, I was never a Scout. In fact, I didn’t have much knowledge of scouting firsthand until I became a pastor. Since then, every church I’ve been at with one exception had a Scout troop. As I’ve worked alongside their leadership, I’ve been blessed to serve alongside them teaching God and Me and God and Family classes for badges. Recently, I had a chance to chat with their Scouts about God, their relationship to Him as well as their relationship to others following Him. Throughout all my interactions though, I never quite noticed how this particular passage of Philippians and the Scout Law have such tremendous overlap when you think about it for a moment. The Scout Law, after all, reminds Scouts that they are to be **HELPFUL**. Volunteer to help others without expecting a reward. Isn’t that what this passage is ultimately about? Jesus Christ, though there was **NO GAIN** in it for HIM, undertakes the incarnation, death and resurrection for no other reason than to save us from eternal death. With no benefit, Christ takes on flesh to follow the Father’s Will. **FRIENDLY**. Be a friend to everyone, even people who are very different from you. In one of my favorite passages of the Gospel of John, Jesus Christ says this in the 15th Chapter of the Gospel of John, *“No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”* **KIND**. Treat others as you want to be treated.

Matthew 22:37-40 – *“And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”*

But what’s important to note is that these are the actions taken precisely when things aren’t going well. Sure, it’s easy to think like a servant when the sun is shining and the rain clouds are far away, still another thing to think about other people when the storms arrive. But what Paul is telling us is that even under adverse circumstances, we can be active in caring for others. We can be willing and able to surrender and sacrifice what’s ours in order to stave off the bad feelings this world so inevitably gives us.

Individualism is the mark of this country. If anything, we are dedicating more and more time and energy into being individualized. We need to separate ourselves from the pack, be unique and plant our own flag. To some extent, this is okay. I wouldn’t want us to become automatons. But individualism needs to be held in tension with a collective sense of well-being. We are to live not for ourselves, but for one another. That’s what Jesus Christ taught us to do.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.