



Servanthood in a Self-Serving World

Philippians 2:1-8 | J. Austin Becton | March 21, 2015

Today is the final sermon in our series “Church: The Theatre of the Gospel.” We will be wrapping up with the topic of Servanthood in a Self-Serving World. Philippians 2:1-8 is counter-cultural to our day and age. We live in a culture greatly influenced by theories of Abraham Maslow and the like. Humanist and psychologist, he essentially contends that contentment and growth come from the close attention to the needs of one’s self. Somewhere inside of all of us we want his theories to make sense and be true. After all, “If I don’t take care of my self, who will?” And really...who better to look out for ourselves than ourselves? The logic seems to be there...or is it? Even in paying close attention to the needs of one’s self many are still discontent with daily life, kids, job, school, and even church, wanting more...or “something else.” You do not need some scientific study to tell you this. Look inward, and look at the world around you. But, why is this? Let’s take a look. In our passage we will see Paul appealing to the Philippian church to abandon their self-centered ambitions and pursuit of empty glory and in place of these to take up a spirit of servanthood towards others.

The Flourishing of the Local Church

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy...” Paul lays out the conditions for what he is about to ask (**If X, Then X**). **If** we have the God who actively participates in our lives, and you have experienced His goodness, as I know you have, **THEN** “complete my joy.” Now, Paul may seem self-focused, but he is not. This was a pastoral appeal. Paul found his joy in Christ, yet his joy in Christ was not separated from the external circumstances of the church. As such, completion of joy is Paul’s longing for the church at Philippi to join the mission of being the theatre of the gospel to ends of the earth. But, what exactly was Paul asking of them? “...complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” The repetition seen in verse 2 signals that Paul was trying to make a strong point and wanted the Philippians to “get it.” Being read aloud, they would have quickly drawn the connection to what Paul had written previous in Philippians 1:27 that his desire was to see them “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.” Kevin Vanhoozer states in his book *Faith Speaking Understanding*, which is available in the welcome area, “It takes a company of players to represent the good news of Jesus Christ. The gospel is not primarily an escape clause by which individuals make their getaway to heaven but rather an announcement that God has done something in Christ to change the world, together with the implicit summons to confirm our lives to this new reality.” Paul got it! The Church is “The Theatre of the Gospel.” He knew the work of the Church was to display the gospel for all creation to observe. The chief concern was the advancement of the gospel. But, because of the self-ambitions, rivalries, and empty glory seeking the Philippian’s focus fell from living with care for others and concern for advancing the gospel to self-centeredness and self-advance. He desired the Philippians to be a “company of players” who displayed the gospel message, so he dives deeper upon the core of his appeal in verses 3-4, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” So, what is selfish ambition? Conceit? First off, this doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t have ambition or recognize the good work and qualities of others. It means do not do things for personal gain, selfish reasoning, or for the sake of notoriety, rather live out your life for the sake and well-being of others. As such, selfish ambition might be found in the business owner who sales off his business for a sizable profit, securing his future, but leaving his employees without jobs trying to figure out how they will provide for their families. He writes off the hardship that was caused, as having to think about his future and well-being. Or conceit, in the husband who can’t get enough recognition or praise from his wife (or vice versa). Always complaining that they aren’t recognized, appreciated, or rewarded as they feel they should be. After all they worked a 40-hour week, or put up with the kids all day everyday. Most of us understand what self-ambitions and conceit are, but sometimes we do not realize how easily they creep into our hearts, lives, and the church. Perhaps you left a Sunday service not necessarily angry, but just annoyed...sermon didn’t address what you thought it should have...the kid’s department had a rule you didn’t like. Or your status as a leader, teacher, deacon, elder, etc. has become your goal and, frankly, idol, rather than loving and caring for your brothers and sisters with the love of Christ. *When the “church” is simply a means for you to be served or serve yourself*



it is no longer “*The Theatre of the Gospel*,” but has been relegated to yet another self-glorifying, consumeristic endeavor...*a theatre of self...a one man show*. The (capital “C”) Church and the Gospel will always flourish because of the eternal work of God in Christ, but we can make what we define as “the local church” an objectification of church... a means to our own end...switching it out for something else that’s not the Church. But, dream with me for a moment. Imagine the local church being a place where we all strive for the same goal of advancing the gospel, working together in one spirit not seeking our own agendas, glory, or self-centered ambitions. Not contending for our rights and freedoms, but for the completion of joy in our brothers and sisters...truly being a theatre of the gospel, where people look in and see the glorious work of Christ Jesus. Imagine it being a place where people were consumed with a spirit of servanthood in midst of a world that encourages self-service. Imagine it being a place where everyone rejoiced in their service, joyfully putting the interests of others above their own goals, agendas, and recognition. A place where deep joy spilled out of joining prayer meetings petitioning the burdens of others, anticipating the needs of others, making disciples, speaking truth in love by both affirming and challenging one another, helping to carrying the weight of church gatherings rather than coming to consume for your own well-being. To even imagine that, we have to realize that this, the local church, isn’t about you or me. We are a company of players in the theatre of the gospel, displaying the hope, purpose, and value found in the gospel to a world all round us each and every day that seeks hope, purpose, and value through self-glory, self-help, and self-service. In so doing, we advance the gospel. When the church – the theatre of the gospel – flourishes, the culture around the church will not only see it, but will begin to experience the benefits of the gospel’s beauty, richness, and command. Now, I want to broaden your view from the flourishing of the local church to human flourishing.

Human Flourishing

Notice Paul’s absolute language at the beginning of verse 3 “**Do nothing...**” In this simple statement, Paul broadens his previous statement. His language won’t allow us to confine his appeal to inside the church. This phrase in Greek contains two negatives and omits the verb. Very literally translated would be “*Nothing according to selfish ambition, nothing according to vain glory.*” This forcibly draws attention to its absoluteness; that is, “DO NOTHING from selfish ambition or conceit’ is binding on ALL Christian lives in ALL circumstances at ALL times. What Paul is saying here is, “*No longer are you to pursue self-serving ambitions or goals, but now that you are a part of the theatre of the gospel, in representing the gospel, you should always, in all areas of your life, pursue the service of others above yourself.*” It is so incredibly easy for us to live our daily lives consumed with our own interest and ambitions. Why? Because, it is so hard for many of us to take service outside the church or beyond volunteering for a non-profit. When we think of serving we immediately want to talk about our experiences at the local church or a mercy ministry. Now, these are incredible opportunities of service and for sharing in the work of the gospel, and we need people actively involved in them. But the point is this these are *opportunities* for service. Paul has called the Philippians into a lifestyle of service. One that is not confined to punctiliar moments, but pours out of their lives affecting all that they do! So, what might a lifestyle of service look like? We obviously can’t address every aspect so let’s consider our work. Around fifty percent, dare I say more, of our waking hours are spent working...whether in our jobs, parenting children, or as students. Yet, most of us rarely think of our work as a form of service. If that is the case then that means in reality, at a maximum, less than 50% of our conscious hours are spent thinking about the interests of others above our own. As such, I want to zero in on some practical applications of service through our work. Miroslav Volf in his book *Work in the Spirit* makes this weighty statement echoing the words of Paul, “The stress on the pursuit of self-interest in modern societies is at odds with tone of the most essential aspects of a Christian theology of work, which insists that one should not leave the well-being of other individuals and the community to the unintended consequences of self-interested activity, but should consciously and directly work for others.” Volf’s challenge is to be intentional in our service to others. Not just to go about our day focused on our own interests and ambitions, assuming the well-being of others will be looked after. Yet, how often are our minds and ambitions set upon getting a raise? The next promotion? Recognition for all our hard work? Rather, shouldn’t we be praying to the Holy Spirit...“How do I utilize the giftings God has provided me to serve others?” “How can I better connect my work to gospel mission?” Imagine going into your work with a spirit and attitude that echoes the words of Christ in Mark 10:45, “I have not come to be served, but to serve.” Talking about counter-cultural! Your boss chews you out for not doing a project as she saw fit –



even though she provide you awful directions. Most of our immediate responses would be to make a laundry list of all things she is doing wrong, but what if you prayerfully asked the radical question, “How can I serve her?” And instead of belittling and gossiping about her to your co-workers or even City Group, you stop and pray, you ask God to let you see her as He sees her, and you begin to affirm her god-reflecting characteristics. Or perhaps you were in a race for a promotion and the other guy, who you feel is incompetent, gets the job. What might it look like for you to be a representation of Christ in this context...and take on servanthood remembering that you are a player in the Theatre of the gospel? Instead of complaining or getting bent out of shape, you genuinely congratulate him and offer to support him however you can in his new role. Maybe it’s that you are a mom, or dad, that is exhausted from a long, draining, and emotional day. You are on the brink of losing your mind. All you want is an evening of quiet. But, that’s not going to happen because your 5 year-old boy just got infuriated over something senseless and has progressed to kicking and screaming on the kitchen floor. Rather, than yanking him up and spanking him in hopes of creating a peaceful environment, you take the time to serve the one who should be in reality serving you. You sit him down, hug and comfort him, explaining in a child-friendly way that you love him, but more importantly God loves him and does want us to loose our tempter because we do not get what we want. Reflect on our own situation and scenarios of life. How might you live out a spirit of servanthood? The applications for this are endless. It is why Paul use the forceful language of... “DO NOTHING from selfish ambition or conceit.” Now some are in the midst of a dichotomy of thought. On one side you are thinking the idea of this is awesome...but, on the other hand, this is impossible! Aren’t we imperfect and sinful creatures? Yes, you’re right. Yet, notice what Paul says later on in Philippians 3:12-14, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” We aren’t perfect, we won’t and can’t live out perfect servanthood, but nevertheless we are to strive for it. So, I challenge you to close the gap between now and the “day of Christ”...don’t simply coast through your service to others...performing your duties. Instead, strive, contend, and press into your service to others. Give freely of yourself. Lay down selfish ambitions and pursuits of empty glory to serve others as Christ first served you.

The Servant Lord

Picking up in verse 5, “[Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...](#)” It is only by gazing on *Christ Jesus* that we will ever become the theatre of the gospel. Paul knew that only through God in Christ Jesus would one be able to tear of the spirit of self and put on a true spirit of servanthood. Jesus was and is the epitome of servanthood because he is truly the Servant Lord. “[...in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.](#)” Jesus became our servant. Though he was fully God and was fully due and worthy of our service, he did not come to be served. Jesus never gave up his divinity; this is important; rather he gave up his rights and privileges of divinity to serve you and me. As fully God, he restricted himself to the confines of humanity - hunger, need for sleep, the need to grow and mature, physical pain, and a gruesome physical death upon a cross - in order to serve his creation. THIS – IS - HUGE! Why would Christ do this? Why would God in Christ Jesus demean himself to flesh, let alone as a servant? Paul in Acts 17:25 states, “[nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.](#)” God does not need our service; rather we need of His. This is more than Jesus displaying an example to be followed. This is Jesus, God in Christ, the Son of God, the Servant Lord coming to serve you and me, to satisfy our needs. If you feel that you can take care of #1...If you think peace, joy, happiness, fulfillment, worth, and meaning can be derived through staying focused on your goals, dreams, needs, and ambitions...If you feel that you have a lot to offer God in your skills, ideas, talents, and he should take advantage them and use you for “greater things”...If you think you can complete your own joy by blazing your own trails, clearing your own path, and making a name for yourself...then this, frankly & hopefully, feels like a wrecking ball to your world as your selfish ambitions are being broken down and reconstructed into others-centered ambitions by the grace of Jesus. What hopeful news for those who are weak in spirit, who do not have it “all together,” who have been broken by pain and suffering, who sit in the ruins of



selfish ambition, who yearn to feel conviction rather than condemnation. The Servant Lord Jesus humbled himself upon a cross that we, his creation, might be served, delivered, brought into true freedom, given true hope, purpose, and value, set on mission as players in the midst of the beautiful, glorious, and joy filled Theatre of the Gospel! He's calling and declaring, "You want to be fulfilled, you want to live with contentment, you want to be eternally satisfied, you want your joy to be complete? Be served by me! My service is enough!" Your service will never be enough, but His service is making all things new, even you. He as served us so perfectly that we have been freed to go forth in service to others in midst of a self-serving world!