

Advent often lifts our eyes up with the stars, angels, and the glow of Christmas lights, but the real movement of Advent isn't upward at all. It's downward. The God of heaven doesn't reveal his greatness by climbing higher; he bends low. He trades a throne for a manger, majesty for vulnerability, glory for the weakness of human flesh. In Jesus, love came down—not demanding to be served, but choosing to serve, and not grasping for status, but emptying himself for our sake.

That downward movement—the humility of Christ—is precisely what Paul invites us to see in Philippians 2. Before we ever get to the cross or the resurrection, Paul shows us the heart of Jesus: a self-giving, others-first humility that changes everything.

I saw a small picture of this one summer on our annual high school houseboat trip. We had ninety students and adults spread across seven houseboats—chaos in the best possible way. Getting that many people on board with their luggage, loading the food, hauling the water, let's say, there's no such thing as personal space on a houseboat.

The only way a trip like that works is if everyone looks out for one another. If we don't share the same mindset, we won't get where we're going, we won't eat when we're supposed to, and the boat will turn into a pigsty in about six hours. Every person has to put their houseboat crew ahead of themselves.

Our upperclassmen had got this. They had been on enough trips to know the drill. In 108-degree heat, they were checking on other boats, making sure meals were ready, and making sure every student had water. They were not just thinking about their own comfort; they were watching out for all ninety of us.

And then there were the freshmen girls. Now, a handful of them were incredible—cooking, cleaning, and serving everyone around them. But the rest? They were sitting on their butts doing absolutely nothing while their friends worked their tails off. So, after a day and a half, we had what we called a “family chat.”

I had to explain what it means to serve one another, and that it all comes down to one word: humility. It's putting someone else's needs ahead of your own. It's showing up, pitching in, bending low. It is the heart of Jesus.

That's precisely what Advent calls us to see and imitate. Love bends low and finds greatness in humility. Philippians 2 invites us into that very posture—the mindset of Christ himself.

**Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Philippians 2:1-4.**

#### **Paul calls the church to a humble, others-first unity.**

Just like our houseboat trip only worked when everyone looked out for each other, Paul knows the church in Philippi can only move forward if they share the same mindset—the mindset of humility.

On those houseboats, when students embraced that posture, something beautiful happened. But when some of our freshmen forgot that posture—when they sat on the back deck while their friends worked—the whole boat suffered. It didn't take long before we needed a “family meeting” to reset the mindset.

In a sense, Paul is holding a family meeting with the Philippians. He gathers them through this letter and says, “Let's talk about how we treat each other. Let's talk about the posture required for the gospel to move forward.” And he starts with a call to unity. Not unity built on preferences. Not unity built on personality. But unity built on the humility of Jesus. Paul urges them: Be of the same mind. Have the same love. Be one in spirit and one in purpose.

In other words: Let the posture of Christ, his downward, others-first humility, be the posture you take toward one another. Because just like a houseboat crew, a church can fall apart from the inside, long before anything from the outside can sink it. And then Paul gets intensely practical. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility value others above yourselves.” The world teaches us the opposite: push ahead, elevate yourself, claim your rights. But the gospel forms a different kind of community, one where people bend low because their Savior did.

Does anyone know what the most complex instrument in the orchestra is? The second violin. You can find plenty of people eager to play first violin—front and center, with the spotlight, carrying the melody. But to find someone willing to play second violin with enthusiasm, skill, and joy? That's much harder. Yet without the second violin, there is no harmony. Without the supporting notes, the beauty collapses into noise.

The church is the same. Unity is impossible if everyone insists on being first chair. The harmony of the gospel only emerges when people are willing to take the lower part, to support, to lift, to serve, to play the notes no one applauds.

This is the unity Paul is calling for, a unity shaped by people willing to play second violin for the sake of Christ. When we bend low and value others above ourselves, when we play second violin gladly, we adopt the posture of Jesus—that's when the church becomes beautiful under pressure. Because love bends low and finds greatness in humility. Paul is calling the Philippians, and us, to be that kind of community.

### **Paul calls us to the ultimate example of humility: Jesus.**

After calling the church to unity built on humility, Paul immediately takes us to the source. If we want to know what humility looks like, we don't look to culture or personality types—we look to a Person.

Paul moves our eyes straight to Jesus. "Have this mindset among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." He is saying that humility isn't something you muster up. It's something you receive from Jesus himself. For some of us, when we think about God, we picture him as distant, sitting far off in heaven, wielding power, issuing commands, keeping his distance. But Philippians 2 completely redefines that picture. Because the God revealed in Jesus doesn't rule by standing far above us. He rules by drawing near and bending low.

Before we picture Jesus kneeling, we need to remember who Jesus is. This is not a powerless man learning humility. This is the eternal Son of God. The One through whom all things were made. The One who spoke galaxies into existence. The One who commands wind and waves. The One before whom angels cover their faces. Philippians tells us he was in very nature God—all authority, all glory, all power. And it is that all-powerful God, who bends low.

When Jesus stoops to wash feet, it is not because he has no other option; it is because love chooses the lowest place. Even Jesus' closest followers struggled to understand the downward way of love. Mark 10:35–45 tells us a perfect story of misunderstanding humility.

Not long before Jesus goes to the cross, James and John pull him aside with a bold request. *"Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. 'Teacher,' they said, 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask'"* (v. 35). In other words, "Jesus, when you win, can we have the top spots? Can we be first violin? Can we be on the top of the houseboat sun-bathing while everyone else serves?"

They imagined greatness the way the world imagines it: status, recognition, hierarchy, looking out for number one. And when the other ten disciples heard about it? Mark says they were indignant! Not because they were humble but because they wanted those seats too. It is the exact picture Paul warns against: internal rivalry, competition, and ego. The things that destroy unity.

Then Jesus gathers them as we did on the houseboat for our "family meeting," and he says: *"Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all"* (vv. 43–44). And then He anchors it in himself: *"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"* (v. 45).

Jesus doesn't just teach this, he embodies it. On the night before the cross, while the disciples are still arguing about who is greatest, Jesus quietly stands up from the meal. He removes his outer garment, wraps a towel around his waist, pours water into a basin, and the King of heaven trades his crown for a basin and a towel. The One who should have been served chooses instead to kneel. The One with all authority takes the posture of a servant. I'm reminded of an old Michael Card song,

**"The Basin and the Towel."**

**In an upstairs room, a parable**

**Is just about to come alive**

**And while they bicker about who's best**

**With a painful glance, He'll silently rise**

**Their Savior Servant must show them how**

**Through the will of the water**

**And the tenderness of the towel**

**And the call is to community**

**The impoverished power that sets the soul free**

**In humility, to take the vow**

**That day after day we must take up the basin and the towel**

**In any ordinary place**

**On any ordinary day**

**The parable can live again**

**When one will kneel and one will yield**

## **Our Savior Servant must show us how**

### **Through the will of the water**

**And the tenderness of the towel. Written By  
Michael Card**

This is Philippians 2 in motion. This is humility embodied. This is love bending low. And now, seeing Jesus kneel, seeing him wash the very feet that will run away in fear, even the feet of the one who will betray him, the disciples finally witness true greatness.

Greatness isn't a seat at the right or the left. Greatness isn't being first chair violin. Greatness isn't sitting on the houseboat deck while others work. Greatness is bending low for the sake of others. Jesus is redefining greatness not as climbing higher but as bending lower. Not getting the best seat but taking the lowest one.

That's exactly what Paul shows us next. It's as if Paul says, "If you want to see humility, look here. If you want to understand unity, watch him. If you want to know how love bends low, look at the way Christ came down."

For years, every December, we would rent a cable car in the city with our junior high ministry. The students would make bag lunches, and then we'd ride the cable car through San Francisco, handing them out to unhoused people. We intentionally went to places like the Tenderloin—places most people try hard to avoid.

It was always an incredible experience. The kids saw parts of the city they'd never seen before. They heard stories. They learned compassion. It was one of those nights where you could almost feel God shaping their hearts.

But junior high boys are still junior high boys. At some point during the evening, one of the boys stepped in human feces. And when we got back into the church van, instead of asking for help, he proceeded to wipe his shoe all over the floor of the van, trying to get it off. As we drove home, I kept catching a smell. I thought, That's bad...but also, this is a van full of middle school boys. Hard to tell what's normal.

We got back to the church, unloaded the van, and everyone went home. After the lights were off and the place was quiet, I went back out to investigate the smell. And that's when I found it. It was definitely poop. And in that moment, I was irritated. I was tired. I was annoyed. And I immediately started thinking, "I don't have to deal with this. Someone else can clean it tomorrow."

But standing there alone in that van, I knew exactly what Jesus was inviting me to do, and I didn't want to. I knew the downward path was waiting for me. I knew the basin and towel moment had arrived. And everything in me wanted

to walk away. But eventually, I grabbed the cleaning supplies and got to work.

As gross as that moment was, it became holy. Because that's where humility usually meets us—not on a stage, not in applause, but in unseen, inconvenient, uncomfortable obedience. That night, Jesus reminded me that love doesn't just come down in big, beautiful moments. Love comes down into messes we'd rather avoid.

That night in the van taught me something I still have to relearn. Humility almost never feels holy in the moment. It feels inconvenient. It feels beneath us. It feels like something someone else should handle. And that is why moments like that matter—because they reveal the posture of our hearts.

John 13 shows us Jesus kneeling with a towel. But Philippians 2 pulls back the curtain and shows us how far that humility really went. The basin and towel were not the beginning of Jesus' humility; they were just a glimpse of it. Paul tells us that long before Jesus bent down to wash feet, He bent down from heaven itself.

Philippians 2:5–11 is one of the most breathtaking pictures of Jesus in all of Scripture. It is the theology behind the manger, the meaning beneath Christmas, the heartbeat of Advent. And it begins with a mindset. Read the story behind the story—the downward journey of Jesus, the love that didn't cling to its rights, the love that came down all the way for us.

**In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming 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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:5–11.**

*"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:" (v. 5).* Paul isn't inviting us to imitate Jesus from a distance. He's reminding us: This mindset is already yours because Christ is in you. The downward way of humility isn't just something you try harder to do; it's something Jesus grows in you. And what is this mindset?

**Jesus bent low by releasing his rights.**

*"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;" (v. 6).* Jesus didn't cling to privilege. He didn't demand the spotlight. He didn't insist on being first violin. He let go. He chose the lower part. In a world that tells us to climb, Jesus descends. In a culture obsessed with entitlement, Jesus empties himself.

### **Jesus bent low by becoming a servant.**

*"Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (v. 7).* He didn't enter the world with power, but with poverty. Not with applause, but with obscurity. Not with angels surrounding him, but with stinky farm animals. Advent reminds us that the hands that sculpted galaxies became the tiny hands of a baby. The One who commands legions of angels submitted himself to the care of a young Jewish couple. Love didn't float above us. Love came down into our condition.

### **Jesus bent low even to death.**

*"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (v. 8).* This is the deepest note in the symphony of his humility. Not just birth, not just incarnation, not just servanthood, but sacrifice. Jesus went to the furthest, lowest, and darkest place love could go. Why? To lift us up. To take sinners and make them sons and daughters. To take the spiritually dead and make them alive. To take the unworthy and call them beloved.

This is why Paul holds up Jesus as the model. Because humility isn't weakness, humility is the strongest thing love ever does. Humility is what makes the gospel possible. Humility is what makes unity possible. Humility is what makes the Church beautiful. And then, after this great descent, comes the great reversal:

### **God lifted him up.**

*"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name," (v. 9).* Jesus didn't exalt himself; God exalted him. Jesus didn't promote himself; he emptied himself. And God lifted him higher than any self-promotion ever could. This is the pattern of the Kingdom: Greatness isn't found in climbing higher; greatness is found in bending lower.

Just like the second violin creates harmony, and the houseboat only flourishes when people serve one another, the Church shines when we follow the humble descent of Jesus. This is why Paul says: "Have this mindset among yourselves..." Love came down. Love bent low. And this is the way greatness is revealed in the people of God. So the question beckons, how do we bend low like Jesus?

### **Bend low before you're invited**

Humility isn't reactive—it's proactive. It looks for ways to serve before a need is announced. Who in your life needs you to take the lower place? Where can you bend first, instead of waiting for others? What "second violin" role can you pick up with joy? When you choose the lower place, you look like Jesus.

### **Bend low by seeing what others miss**

Humility starts with awareness. The upperclassmen on the houseboat didn't wait to be told; they saw the need and stepped in. Ask yourself daily: Who's struggling? Who's overloaded? Who needs encouragement today? Where can I quietly make someone else's load lighter? Humility is seeing someone else's need and stepping toward it.

### **Bend low by releasing your grip**

James and John wanted the best seats. The freshmen girls wanted the easier seats. But Jesus shows us the way of emptying, not elevating. Where is pride whispering for attention in your life? "I deserve more appreciation." "I shouldn't have to do that." "I should go first." "I've already served enough." The way of Jesus is letting go and releasing rights, status, comfort, and control. When you stop needing the spotlight, you start shining the light of Christ.

### **Bend low in unseen faithfulness**

Pick something no one will see, no one will thank you for, and no one will notice. Clean something that's not your mess. Serve someone who cannot repay you. Give quietly. Apologize first. Offer forgiveness without demanding anything back. Speak less and listen more. When humility is hidden, it's most like Jesus.

### **Bend low, relying on Jesus**

Philippians 2 doesn't begin with a command; it starts with a gift: "Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus." You don't muster humility. You don't manufacture it. You receive it from the One who lives in you. Ask him daily: "Jesus, bend my heart low like yours." Humility is not a personality trait; it is Christ formed in you. Advent announces something the world still doesn't understand: Greatness is not found in rising higher; greatness is found in bending lower.

That is the story of Philippians 2. That is the testimony of the manger. That is the meaning of the cross. Jesus bent low from heaven to earth, from glory to obscurity, from power to servanthood, and from life to death—all so he could lift us up. Love came down. Love bent low. And now Paul says, "Have this mindset among yourselves."

So how will love bend low through you this week? Who will you serve quietly? Who will you put ahead of yourself?

What "second violin" role will you take on with joy? Where will you release your rights and choose the lower place?

As we follow the downward way of Jesus, the world sees something beautiful, believable, and unmistakably Christlike because love bends low and finds greatness in humility. And when we bend low, we reveal the One who bent lower still so that all of heaven and earth would one day declare: "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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