

The Attitude of Christ

Philippians 2:1-13

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The Apostle Paul makes a heartfelt plea for his beloved friends in Philippi to make his joy complete. He asks them to, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:3, 4) Setting aside selfish ambition and vain conceit, with an attitude of humility, consider others better than yourselves. Instead of looking out only for your own interests, pay attention to the interests of others. I saw a demonstration once that I thought did a pretty good job of showing how selfish interests could get your life tangled up, but looking out for others could have a good result.

It had to do with some ping pong balls and a bag of rice. The person leading the demonstration compared the rice to our own interests, and the ping pong balls to the interests of others. Holding up this jar, they said if we put our own interests in first, we manage to take care of all of our interests. As they were speaking they poured the rice into the jar. We make room in our lives for the things that are important to us. Then they picked up the ping pong balls, which represented the interests of others. They started to put the ping pong balls into the jar. After just a few ping pong balls the jar was filled up and there was no room for any more balls. The point was that if we put our interests first, we don't have room for the interests of others. Point well taken.

Then the person emptied out the jar, which had all of the rice and a few of the ping pong balls, and they started over. This time, they put all the ping pong balls in first, all the interests of others. The Apostle said look out for the interests of others. After all the ping pong balls were in the jar, all the interests of others, it was time to add the rice, our own interests. I fully expected to have the tables turned. Now, all of our own interests would not fit into the jar. There would be rice that didn't fit. Except with the ping pong balls in the jar first, something surprising happened. When the rice was added, the rice filled in and around the ping pong balls, and when it was all said and done, both the ping pong balls and the rice fit together in the jar...when you put the ping pong balls in first...when you put the needs of others first.

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” The fact that this illustration was still rattling around in my brain more than twenty years after I saw it first demonstrated says something about its effectiveness. Looking out for the needs of others is a central part of our faith as people of God. The command to love our neighbor is linked right with the command to love God and is called the second great commandment. The chapter where we first find love

your neighbor is Leviticus 19. In that chapter we are given numerous ways we might look out for the interests of others. It includes respecting mother and father. It includes an ancient practice of harvesting your fields, but leaving room on the edges of the field so there would be some leftover grain, some remaining harvest, so that the poor people could come and grab a little bit to eat. In other words, don't take everything for yourself. Share with others. That passage says it is not only for the poor. Leave it there for the alien as well, the stranger, the refugee. Looking out for the interests of others in Leviticus 19 would include not stealing, or lying, deceiving others, cursing the deaf, perverting justice, or spreading slander. There is a command that we make sure we don't hate our brother or our sister, our fellow human being. What does it mean to look out for the interests of others? A good beginning is to love your neighbor. As so often is the case, the bible has some words that challenge us in deep ways. In Leviticus 19, the chapter about loving our neighbor, we are told not only to leave a little bit of grain around the edges for the poor and the alien. We are also told in Leviticus 19:33 that when an alien lives with us in our land, we are not to mistreat the alien. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt."

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." You would be right to make sure I said the whole command about love your neighbor. It says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." This isn't all just about the interest of others. There is the element that we need to be loved as well. Paul captures that when he writes, "Each of you should look not only...to your own interests." The illustration of the walnuts and the rice recognizes that we do have needs, we do have interests. But be sure you do not look only to your own interests.

Jesus said some words that are helpful. Instead of living anxiously, looking after our own needs, being worried about what we are going to eat, about what we are going to wear, he assured us God knows all of our needs. In fact, he basically says trust God to take care of your needs. "Seek first the kingdom of heaven and God's righteousness, and God will take care of your needs." If you put the ping pong balls in first, trust God to fill in the rest. If this was a stewardship sermon, a sermon about trusting God with our gifts, with our offerings, with our tithes, there would be a word for us in that context. If we give our gifts to God, will there be enough for ourselves. If we give God our tithe, 10%, how in the world is that other 90% going to get me through my life with my own wants and needs? The prophet Malachi watched people wrestling with that, he watched people holding tightly to what they had because they just couldn't figure out how God would take care of their needs if they gave him their tithe, and the prophet spoke on behalf of the Lord. "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." (Malachi 3:10)

Put God's gift first, and God says test me, and just watch how I will fill in the rest, fill in your needs.

In these words from chapter two in the letter to the church at Philippi, the Apostle Paul has some helpful words about how we fill up our lives. Don't look only to your own needs and interests. Look to the needs and interests of others. Don't let yourself be led by selfish ambition. Instead, with an attitude of humility consider others better than yourselves. That is some pretty good counsel on how to go about filling our lives in ways that trust God to provide while at the same time paying attention to the needs of others. As we enter this season of stewardship, certainly one of the messages we all need to hear is, "Look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." In stewardship, we look to the interests of others, which includes the interests of the church, the community, and the world, when we do things like make a pledge to the life of the church. We look to the interests of others even as we trust that in putting God first, in putting the kingdom of God first, God will provide for our needs.

But if all we heard Paul say today were these important words about how we might fill our lives in ways that honor God, we would miss the most important thing Paul wants to say about our lives. The most important thing he wants to say about our lives, about our lives as ones who follow Jesus Christ, about our lives as ones who have been loved by Jesus Christ and are trying to love him in return, the most important thing Paul wants to say about our lives in Jesus Christ is not about how we fill our lives. It turns out this passage isn't just about filling our lives in ways that honor God. Ultimately, this passage is more about being emptied than it is about being filled.

After Paul writes those important words that prove very helpful in terms of how we might fill our lives in ways that honor God, doing nothing out of selfish ambition and looking to the needs of others, the Apostle directs our attention to Jesus Christ. When we look at Jesus Christ, we realize that his life was not about being filled. His life was about being emptied. Paul tells the early believers their attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus, "Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!"

In these words about Jesus, Paul is quoting a hymn that was popular among the early Christians. The followers of Jesus did not sing about how Jesus came and filled his life. They sang about how Jesus, in very nature God, did not seek to be equal with God. They sang about how he emptied himself. They sang about how he made himself literally nothing. He who is equal with God emptied himself and became human, like us. And yet that was not the end of it. He became a servant. Think of that day when Jesus wrapped a towel around his own waist and washed the feet of his disciples. He was doing the work of servant. He said, "If you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven,

learn to be the servant of all.” He who was in very nature God did not grasp at being like God, rather he made himself nothing, he emptied himself, he became human, and he became one who was a servant.

But even that doesn’t capture the fullness of how he emptied himself. He became obedient to death, even death on a cross. The church has sought to understand the fullness of how Christ emptied himself through images such as he gave his life for us, he sacrificed for us, he offered himself for us, he took our burdens, our sin, our shame, he proved his love for us by dying on the cross, and in his own words, Jesus showed the greatest love of all. “Greater love has no one than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends.” As helpful as the words might be about how we might fill our lives in ways that honor God and look out for the needs of others, Paul has something more important he wants to say. Jesus emptied himself.

The term theologians use for this emptying is Kenosis. Kenosis means to empty. One commentator notes that “Kenosis is the essential character of the biblical God. If a single image could capture the character of God in the first creation account, it would be a gracious bow. All of God’s acts, blessings, and delights in creating are for others. In the Scriptures this is typical of God, who is intimately concerned with justice, peace, and the flourishing of all creatures, who is ‘on high’ but never remote, who is ‘over all’ but faithfully and dramatically invested in life on earth. In the very act of creating in relation to all creatures and creation, the witness is to a God who is essentially kenotic. God does not exploit God’s power or embrace hierarchy or rest in privileged autonomy. God is love.”¹ Because God so loved the world, God emptied himself for us. Greater love has no one than this. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

There are really good words about filling our lives in ways that honor God, about looking out for the needs of others and not just our own. I hope this season of stewardship we all take a deep and prayerful look at our lives, about how we are filling our lives, about what it might look like to trust God more, to put God’s priorities first, and to watch how God provides. There are important words today about how we fill our lives.

And then there are words about how we empty our lives. There are words about having the same attitude as Jesus Christ. Ernest Gordon’s book *Through the Valley of the Kwai* recounts his experience as a prisoner of war during World War II. He and his fellow prisoners were all fighting to survive. Their mindset was self-preservation. “My pay is my own, isn’t it? I can do with it as I please. We’re all in a tough spot; but I need everything I can get for myself. When the chips are down, it’s a case of to hell with everyone else. Too bad, but that’s the way life is.” here wasn’t much looking out for the needs of others.

¹ Bill Greenway, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, p. 112.

Then a story started circulating through the camp. A man named Angus started doing some strange things. Angus had a close friend, a man with whom he had thrown everything in. This type of close friend was called a mucker. Angus' mucker had become sick. Angus began to sneak out of camp to get medicine for his mucker. He went hungry so his mucker could have enough to eat. He cared for him. He nursed him. And Angus' mucker got better. Then Angus collapsed. Just slumped down and died. When Angus died, Ernest Gordon was suffering from ulcers on his legs. A man named Dusty was cleaning his ulcers, and Dusty is the one who told Ernest the story of Angus. Ernest responded , "Do you remember that verse from St. John? "Greater love hath no man..."

"Yes, I remember it," Dusty said, nodding. "I've always thought it one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'" Dusty stood without moving. Then he said, "That's for Angus, all right."

"By some ways of reckoning," said Ernest, "what he did might seem foolish."

"But in other ways," Dusty returned, "it makes an awful lot of sense." (p. 103, 104)

What stands out to me in this story is not simply what Angus did. It was truly beautiful. But what really grabs me is what follows. As a result of Angus giving his life, others begin to give. They begin to share food. They begin to buy medicine for the sick. They begin to nurse and watch over the weak. They even begin to take on the punishments due to others. One man emptied himself for another man. Others were so touched, so convicted, they began to empty themselves.

That isn't just a story from a World War II prisoner of war camp. That is our story. One man emptied himself for others. But he was more than one man. He was Jesus. He was the Son of God. Rather than grasping and trying to be equal with God, he emptied himself. Today when you come to this table you will hear Jesus say, "This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, shed for you." The Son of God is here today so that we might remember how he emptied himself of all but love. Because Jesus emptied himself, men and women and boys and girls have looked at life in a whole new way. Instead of asking ourselves only what it means to have our lives filled, people like you, people like me, have been asking, "How can I empty myself for the kingdom of God?"