

Imitate Christ

Series on Philipians

Today we come to one of the most profound passages in the letter to the Philipians. The first 11 verses of Philipians Chapter 2 contain some deep truths about who Jesus is, and what he came to do. Today I want to be true to what the Apostle Paul was driving at when he wrote this letter, so I trust you will forgive me if we take the passage out of order. I want to start with verses 6 – 8, then go back to verses 1-5. In working our way through it, I will finish up with the events that were the background to the writing of this letter. To help us grasp the essential truth of this passage, I want us to ask ourselves four questions.

- 1. What Did Jesus Do?**
- 2. What Should I Do?**
- 3. What Did Paul Do?**
- 4. What Should We Do?**

1. What Did Jesus Do?

In 1896 Charles Sheldon wrote a novel called "In His Steps". The subtitle was "What Would Jesus Do?" By 1935 it had been translated into 21 different languages. In the 1990's, lots of Christian youth groups across America were studying it, which resulted in bumper stickers and wristbands all asking the question, "What Would Jesus Do?" In April of 2010 a movie came out called WWJD – "What Would Jesus Do?"

I have a problem with the question "What Would Jesus Do?" My problem is the question lets me decide what Jesus might have done in a particular situation. I know my own heart too well. I am liable to water down what I think Jesus might have done, to make life easier for myself. When I ask "What would Jesus do?" I tend to make the answers too soft and too easy. But if I ask a different question I'm forced to go back to the Word of God and face the uncomfortable truth. The question I need to ask is "What **did** Jesus do?" The answer to that question is found in Philipians 2:6-8. This is what Jesus did. ***"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!" (Philipians 2:6-8 NIV)***

What did Jesus do? He took on the shape of a slave. He was God. But he didn't claim that status, or cling to it, but instead let go his Godly form to take on the form of a slave. He let go his God shape to take on slave shape. The limitless God limited himself to human form. Not just any human form, but the lowest form known to man. A slave. From equality with God to being in bondage to men. In the Roman empire, most slaves were treated like cattle. Today cattle in my country have a hole bored in their ear with a tag in it that identifies who owns them. Slaves had no rights. They were the property of their owner. If the owner said they were to get up at two in the morning to serve, that's what they did. They could be beaten and brutalised, sold or even killed if the master wished. They were there to serve their master. They were the lowest of the low in the Roman empire.

In taking the shape of a slave, Jesus set no limits. He didn't say "I'll go this far, but no further. I'll live on earth, as long as it's in a palace. I'll become a man; as long as I can live a comfortable life and die of old age in my bed". No, he humbled himself, and set no limits, even going as far as allowing himself to be crucified in the most barbarous way the mighty Roman empire could devise. Jesus identified utterly with those he came to save. That's what it means to take on the shape of a slave. That's what Jesus did.

2. What Should I Do?

In the last four years Lyn and I have discovered something that some say can save your marriage when you are travelling. It's called a GPS. Instead of a map reader next to me getting very agitated while we are going around a roundabout for the fourth time trying to figure out which exit to take, I have this very calm woman's voice coming from my GPS that says "In 300 meters enter roundabout. Take the third exit". And she even gives me a map with

a big fat green arrow showing me which road I'm to take. And here's the best bit. When I take the wrong road, she doesn't make sarcastic comments or yell at me. She just tells me she is re-planning the route. No matter where I am, I can set the destination, and once that destination has been programmed in, my GPS will take me there. No matter which way I turn, the GPS will bring me back to the right direction and get me to my destination. If it's programmed right, I have confidence it will get me there. Now just hold that thought, and we will read more of what Paul says to the Philippian Christians.

***"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. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 2:1-5 NIV)**

What is he saying? He is saying that when we type "Jesus" into the GPS, we go the same way as he did, from God shape to slave shape. If we really want to become like Jesus, then we are programming our lives to take on the shape of the Lord Jesus. And that shape is slave shape. We are identifying with what Jesus did. The more we become like him, the more we look more and more like slaves. When you have a slave mindset, you don't have high expectations of how well you are going to be treated. You don't expect to have an easy life. You don't expect people to serve you or tell you how wonderful you are. You don't expect a life of comfort and ease. You expect that for as long as you live, you will spend the rest of your life serving the one who owns you.

The destination to be programmed in to our lives today is Jesus. The direction we are heading in is to become like him. And here's the great thing about a GPS. No matter where you started from, if you have the right destination programmed in, you will get there. No matter where you find yourself now, through your own stubbornness or stupidity, or because you thought you knew better, if you programme in the right destination, there is a way to get from where you are to where you need to be. Paul was so confident about this that he wrote to the Philippian Christians ***"being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 1:6 NIV)**. If we have told the Lord that we want to be like Jesus, and that Christ likeness is our destination, then he will get us there. Isn't that great! The reason you and I are here today is to reset our GPS. No matter where we are at, every one of us can do that.

One of the trendy phrases in the corporate world is to talk about going up a level. Well folks, becoming like Jesus isn't about going up a level. It's about going down all the levels to become a slave. It's about becoming as humble as Jesus.

3. What Did Paul Do? (Acts 16:40)

A long time before Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, Paul had set his GPS. He decided that he wanted to be like Christ. What he was writing to the Philippian Christians wasn't something he believed in but didn't practice. He was already in slave shape. Here's how we know.

Luke records in Acts 16 that when Paul and Silas came to Philippi, they started talking to people about Jesus. That was a risky thing to do in a Roman town full of retired Roman soldiers who worshipped Roman gods. The safe thing to do would have been to shut up and say nothing, or say things people wanted to hear. But Paul and Silas were not that concerned whether people liked them or not. They were more interested in preaching the gospel. When they came across a demonised slave girl who was being used as a money making proposition for her owners, Paul knew that if he confronted the demon in this girl it was going to get him into a whole heap of trouble. He was right. When he commanded in the name of Jesus that the evil spirit leave this little girl he set in motion an unstoppable chain of events. He infuriated people. His message and his actions rubbed people up the wrong way. But he was more interested in confronting the economic powers of darkness and the spiritual powers of

darkness, than he was for his own safety. Doesn't that sound to you a lot like Jesus? Paul wasn't asking himself "What would Jesus do?" He was doing what Jesus did.

Now here's the part I find really interesting. Paul and Silas were dragged before the city officials, who decided that as punishment for causing such an uproar in the city, they should be flogged. Think about that. Paul had been flogged and beaten with rods many times before for the sake of Christ. When they stripped him down to a loincloth and strung him up to a pole to flog him, they would have seen the massive number of scars all over his body from previous floggings. He knew that this flogging would be so severe that after a few lashes he would be screaming in pain, and he would lose control of his bodily functions. He had been through this before. He knew it wouldn't be long before he would be unconscious, and perhaps even die. So, why didn't Paul and Silas simply declare that they were Roman citizens? It was illegal to flog a Roman citizen. All they had to do was play the Roman citizen card, and they would be spared all that. Why didn't they speak up?

Paul and Silas chose to suffer for Christ's sake. They were doing what Jesus did, for the sake of the Gospel. They were willing to go through that so that the Gospel would advance and the church would grow in Philippi. Paul and Silas were doing what Jesus did - letting go of privilege, humbling themselves, giving up their status as Roman citizens. That's what happens when your GPS is set to Jesus.

4. What Should We Do?

What would Westlake church look like if we could let go of privilege and become more like Jesus? What if we were more like Jesus and we set no limits on obedience? What if we were to let go of status and people were to see us in slave form? As the people of God we are called to follow the One who let go, who identified utterly, who set no limits, who trusted in God and who knew the time would come when his true identity would be revealed.

What would Westlake look like in 2011 if here this morning we all programmed into our GPS a destination called Jesus. No matter where we are at present, if we all put in the same destination, that we wanted to be like Jesus, wouldn't it be a wonderful thing for us all to go to the same destination together? We would all be moving towards Jesus Christ together. That would be unity.

We are here today to type in our destination - to refresh our GPS. As we head into 2011, we don't have a map. We don't know exactly what terrain we will cross this year. We don't know all the places we will travel to. We don't know what will happen. But we do know that Jesus is our destination. We know what Jesus is like. And we want to be more like him than we are now.

This morning as we conclude I'm going to invite you to respond publically. I'm going to ask you to stand just where you are if you want to be like Christ. For many of us, this will be like pushing the refresh button, where we are reaffirming a decision we made a long time ago that we wanted to be like Jesus. But for some of us, we are so far off track because we have been stubborn and stupid. This is an opportunity to re-programme and get back to destination we were once heading for. And there may be some here today who have never even started this journey yet, who want to set their GPS to Jesus for the first time. You will know and God will know why you are standing. But let's make our response now.

Prayer

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