

For weeks we've been preparing for Christmas; now it's come and gone again. But as we get ready to take down the Christmas lights and pack away the manger scene. As we send off the family and begin to get ourselves back into the routine of school and work and business as usual, I have a very important Christmas question to ask us all.

So What? No, really, so what? What does it all mean, really? Does it mean anything? What difference does this season, this holiday make in the real lives of real people? I ask for two basic reasons:

First, I ask because the world is asking. Out there are hundreds and thousands and even millions of people who watched this holy season go by, and maybe even participated in the parties and gift giving and the muddled, fuzzy wishes of peace on earth and goodwill to one another, but now, even as they pack away their inflatable yard Santa, they are left with a lingering sense of disappointment, as if some expectation they didn't even know they had was left unfulfilled. So I ask for their sake. What difference does Christmas make in the real world?

Second, I ask because this is a basic question of Christian identity. Who is Jesus and what difference does he make in my life, today? Is the world somehow different because God entered human history as one of us, and should that reality affect our experience of life the first week in January just as surely as it did in the final weeks of December? What difference does Christmas... what difference does *Christ*... make in life? How should we live?

I firmly believe that in answering this question for ourselves, we are also providing an answer for all those struggling with the emptiness of a less-than-satisfying Christmas experience, or even a less-than-satisfying life experience. But first we need to answer what Christmas and Christ mean for us. It's a question Paul answers in this fantastic passage in Philippians. Now in terms of meat versus milk scriptures, this passage is a thick, juicy porterhouse steak. I could spend weeks on this passage. (Don't worry, I know that today we only have time for one of those little "free sample" cups you get at Costco.) Still, I do hope you take it home, read it a few times and just gnaw on it a bit. It's good stuff.

#### Acknowledgement

Paul begins with an If/Then statement. I don't have the time to go into the depth of the Greek words used here, but Paul really covers the bases. If you have any encouragement, boldness, or inspiration; if you have any consolation, cheer or comfort; if you have any sense of communion, of relationship or fellowship; if you have any love, or affection deep inside; if you have any concern, pity or compassion. If you have any benefit at all from being a Christian; if there is, in fact, anything good from knowing Christ, THEN, Paul says, live like this.

Of course if you DON'T feel any of those things then maybe Paul isn't talking to you just yet. After all, if none of those things are real for you, then Christ isn't really real for you, yet. Jesus Christ is so much more than just a historical figure who lived thousands of years ago and died on a Roman cross. Jesus Christ is the living, resurrected Lord. He came to earth to save you from death and wants a relationship with you today. That has to make a difference.

So I guess before you can get on to the "then" part of what Paul is saying, you have to honestly ask yourself if you really buy into the "if" part. Do you really believe all this? Is Christ truly real for you? If you don't know the joy, peace, comfort, or feeling of encouragement from knowing Christ; if you don't know the freedom, the depth of love, the feeling of belonging, the downright rootedness of knowing Christ; if you don't know the heightened concern for others,

the growth of love and compassion, the deeper patience, the yearning for goodness, the “belonging” found in Christ, then I pray you meet him soon.

But for those who have met Christ, who have accepted the gifts he offers and have pledged to follow him, for those who truly acknowledge Christ as Lord of their lives, the secret to that life is found here. If that is you, says Paul, “then make my joy complete by being like-minded.”

#### Attitude Adjustment

Here Paul uses a single Greek word that I think summarizes most of what we need to do as Christians. The word is φρονητε, it means to set one’s mind in a certain way, or to take an attitude. It occurs 10 times here in the book of Philippians as Paul reinforces, over and over again, the way we *choose* to think about things. (And before you think “Easy for you to say, Paul,” you should know that Paul was in chains while writing about changing our attitude.) He has been talking in the realms of experience and emotions as he describes the things we receive from Christ: “encouragement, comfort, love, fellowship, tenderness, compassion.” But when he switches to our response, he begins with a conscious act of the will, a self-ordering of the mind. (We intellectual Presbyterians just love verses like this.) Paul seizes onto something that modern Psychologists have found to be true, that one’s attitude in a situation is as important as the situation itself.

Perhaps you have known someone in your life who was a natural born victim; no matter what came along, they just had a knack for finding the dark side. Or, on the other hand, maybe you’ve known people who had an amazing sense of joy and thanksgiving even in the absolute worst of times. The difference is in attitude. More than just what kind of a mood we’re in, attitude is a deep-seated sense of character that springs from within. It’s a self-identity that comes from repeated, conscious acts of our mind, built up over time into a general attitude. “Be like-minded,” he says. Have the same attitude as Jesus. Show the same kind of love, be one in spirit and purpose. What the NIV translates here as “purpose,” is just another variation on the same Greek word for attitude, which Paul repeats for emphasis. We should choose, says Paul, to deliberately adopt an attitude like Jesus. He goes on,

*“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.”*

That’s quite a list. Now some might respond, “Well, what’s wrong with being ambitious? What about ME? ‘Consider others better than yourselves?’ Are you crazy? What about MY needs?” Apparently some people had similar reservations back in Paul’s day, because he decides to put the requests he’s making in perspective.

Your attitude, he says, this SAME attitude that I have just outlined for you, is in fact to be modeled on that of Jesus Christ:

*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/slave,  
being made in human likeness.*

If we think we're sacrificing a lot when, in humility, we consider others better than ourselves, we just need to remember what Christ sacrificed in trading the very *nature* of Godness for the very *nature* of a slave, when he was born that Christmas day so long ago. On Christmas day, God in Jesus rewrote the definitions of king and slave. If God isn't above being humble, why should we think we're too good for it? If God considered you more important than his own life, why should we be selfish in holding on to our own? Look to Jesus and his attitude.

*And being found in appearance as a man,*

*He humbled himself*

*And became obedient to death-*

*Even death on a cross.*

I need to pause for just a moment to talk about power. Power is important to some people (guys in general, my sons in particular...) One of the criticisms the world has of Christianity is that in order to be a Christian you must also sign on to be a doormat. There are those who equate being a Christian to being a wimp, letting bad people push you around while you turn the other cheek. I just don't see that here. Just look at how Jesus emptied himself. Jesus spoke and taught with authority, even to the big shots of his time; he worked wonders and miracles, he forgave sins. Whatever he emptied, it was more than filled up again by the Father. Even at his crucifixion, Jesus reminded Pilate that he couldn't do anything if Jesus hadn't made the choice to let him. I have read scripture many times, and I have never once seen a wimpy Jesus. Only Jesus with this attitude, with his will completely given over to His Father, could stare death in the face unblinking. Only this Jesus, with this humble attitude, would give up all he had, even his own life, so that you and I might have life. Only this Jesus with this attitude could have the strength to embrace the cross in order to save us. This is Christ's character. This is the servant attitude we are called to emulate.

The truth is, the more Christ emptied himself, the more his Father just kept on filling. And the end result was a miraculous exchange. The one who gave up his very nature and emptied himself, humbled himself, was born as one of us, took the attitude of a slave... that same one was exalted to the highest place, so that even death had to bow before him. This was the result of his attitude; this same attitude we are to embrace.

#### Action

"Therefore," Paul says, therefore take this same attitude for yourselves and put it into action. "Obey." Christ became obedient even to death for our sake, so we are to obey the Father. Not in some legalistic sense. You don't have to make the list of dos and don'ts. It's not that easy. Obey, means, give your will to God; all of it, just as Christ did. And then, just as Christ experienced the power of His Father working through him, so you too should work out your salvation with fear and trembling, because "*it is God who is working in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*" The more you give your will to God the Father, the more you realize His working in and through you.

I don't want to be too casual about this. This is hard stuff. Paul says "work-out" and he means it. It's not something anyone else can do for you. Just as no one else can go on a diet for you, or lift weights on your behalf, so no one else can change your attitude for you. (Parents know this all too well!) But just like a workout, the small choices make way for the big. There is a direct correlation between how you choose to respond when someone cuts you off in traffic

and how you will respond someday when you're oncologist calls with the really bad news. There's a direct correlation between how you stand for truth and goodness when you're at home with no one watching and how you will stand for truth when faced with a dilemma in the public square. The small choices we make shape our character and define how we will respond to the big ones. How should we live? We should live lives, every day, that reflect the reality that Christ has come, that reflect the character and attitude he showed as he lived and died and rose again in glory. We should live lives that give truth to the Christmas story every day, in everything.

Now, what does this have to do with those hundreds and thousands and millions who are left wondering at the end of the Christmas season? Well just imagine for a second. I won't make the picture too big, because it's too easy, then, to leave it for someone else to paint. But imagine just about 700 lives lived with the integrity of Christ, surrendered in will to God. Imagine 700 people, about how many we have here at Westminster, incidently, people who come from all walks of life and are of all ages, but who all share the same attitude of service and compassion, who share the same attitude of integrity and honor, who share the same attitude of courage and conviction, who share the same attitude of patience and grace. Imagine those 700 people set loose on a valley of this size. 700 people who fear neither death nor defeat. 700 people feeding the hungry, seeking the lost, standing unflinchingly against wrong. 700 people growing our youth and caring for the aged, building the community of Christ. 700 people visiting the lonely and caring for the sick and for one another and sharing the good news that Christ has come among us and that Christ will come again. Imagine 700 people who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Sovereign Lord, and who adjust their attitude to be his and who put that attitude into action. How should we live? Let us live like that!