

## Gospel Friendship | Paul's Letter to the Philippians

*The Kenosis Model*

Philippians 2.1-11

6.15.14

*Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion,<sup>2</sup> make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;<sup>4</sup> do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.<sup>5</sup> Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,<sup>6</sup> who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,<sup>7</sup> but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.<sup>8</sup> Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.<sup>9</sup> For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,<sup>11</sup> and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

We've been looking at a letter written by the Apostle Paul in the First Century. He was in prison for preaching a message deemed subversive to the Roman Empire. And Paul writes this letter from a jail cell to the first European congregation to say that *this* message, if believed, will bring together people who would NOT otherwise BE together, and this diverse group will become friends – bound together by God and used by God in one another's lives for influence, for good.

This passage is a very famous one. It's often called the "Kenosis passage" because it uses that Greek word "kenosis" translated "empty" – "He emptied Himself taking the form of a servant". In some way Jesus Christ emptied himself but emptied himself of what? Did God become less than God – was He emptied of his God-ness...and does it really matter? Is this a kind of vague, metaphysical discussion/treatise that's argued in the halls of academia but really has NO bearing on the way I raise my kids or

the way I approach work or retirement or how I spend my money? What does this dogma have to do with daily life and practice?

Soooo much has been written about what this section teaches – each word parsed and dissected and we MAY not have patience for all that BECAUSE, “It’s not really important what you believe but what you DO” – or is it? Are a person’s beliefs as important as his lifestyle, his deeds, his practice, his conduct? Which is the real measure of your life – what you believe or what you do?

So, let’s consider, #1 - A Perennial Religious Dilemma – doctrine or practice? #2 - A Wedding of Opposites #3 – The Orthopraxy of Kenosis for Countercultural Community

There’s a kind of dilemma faced by all people – we associate it more with religious people – but really all people, anyone who has commitments to metaphysical things (like questions of values or purpose/meaning). So, for instance an atheist says, “I don’t believe in God!” but that is a metaphysical commitment, it's a belief, a conviction. It can’t be proven. It’s a supposition. OR “I think the goal of life is to be happy”- that too is a faith commitment. So even if you're an atheist, you can’t help making philosophical commitments that REALLY can’t be proven.

So, as we think about faith commitments, beliefs, teachings, doctrines, views, dogma, convictions – no one can be free of them... And people in organized forms of spirituality or organized religions are often criticized for having doctrines... but if we really can’t escape that, is there any way to sort of handle these doctrinal questions/issues; to determine which ones are important? Are any important?

And there’s no shortage of depictions of people who are so fixated on some seemingly small belief that they measure everything by that belief and they lose touch with the bigger picture...and lose sight of human need and of huge glaring STUFF right in front of them...but all they can see and all they can INSIST upon is this little pet doctrine.

We know stories about ridiculously narrow ideas and teachings...churches divide over what seem to be minute disagreements in beliefs. You may

know that on Friday, in Iraq, a cleric in the Shiite Sect of Islam declared war on the Sunni Sect in that nation and to most of us the differences seem miniscule.

And maybe we could conclude that the more beliefs you have or the more defined and committed to those beliefs, the more USELESS you become. Is it possible to keep your beliefs (again, everyone has them) but can we hold them without splitting hairs? And isn't it more important *to sort of "get on with it"* to move on to DOING the spiritual things that make the world a better place and change lives and... you know, DO the stuff that Jesus Christ tells us to do?

Is it a balance? Is that what we're after? Is the key to hold your beliefs MODERATELY and then get out there and do some good in the world?

This passage, the "kenosis passage" is famous for a number of reasons and controversial for those same reasons. Interestingly, many seem to want to make it a DOCTRINAL statement about who Jesus Christ IS and others want to make it an ETHICAL statement about HOW Christians should live.

But one of the beauties of the passage is its refusal to fall into one side or the other. Is it doctrinal? Sure!

Is it practical? Thoroughly!

The whole point is – because of this teaching we act and the stronger we believe it, the more we ACT. To believe this moderately will NOT leave more room for doing good in the world – believe this in a tepid, reserved and halfhearted way and it'll take the wind out of your sails.

This is a marriage of opposites. In most beliefs there seems to be an unavoidable attraction to EITHER be very convicted and convinced and insistent and devoted to the doctrine but then becoming narrow and doctrinaire and merely theoretical and impractical... OR being, on the other hand, a person who doesn't have time for doctrines and dogma and all that hypothetical stuff – "I'm a doer!" AND I hope we can see that both those positions are self-defeating and silly.

BUT HERE is a belief that the more it's actually believed, the more it compels action and the action it compels is LOVE.

This TEACHING is that God is humble. And no one ever lived, no angel, no human being could ever be even a fraction as humble as God Himself.

Eternally existing as a TRI-UNITY, One Being in three Persons, the same in substance, equal in power and glory, ONE of the Persons, the Eternal Son, was Himself God and for us and for our salvation became Man.

He "kenosis-ed" – He parted with his rights and became ONE with us. He became a human being. He did not cease to be God, but laid down His ABOVE-Ness and joined us. God stepped into our situation and became subject to all the STUFF we face in this fallen world. He was born through water and blood and in poverty, in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time (WSC 1:27).

God is HUMBLE – that's the doctrine. The One who is highest, and infinitely higher because He is the One and only Uncreated Being – HE crossed the great divide. No one could ever lower himself like that.

If some great billionaire or head of state or super famous celebrity went to a slum in Calcutta and threw himself into a mud-puddle so a blind, leper could walk over his back – to go from the White House or a great estate to that mud puddle would be a tiny fraction of the distance God, in Jesus Christ humbled Himself for us and for our salvation.

And the upshot IS – IF HE CAME all this way, couldn't you move a few feet? Couldn't you humble yourself to say, "I'm sorry" or "may I help you?" or "yes, go on, I'm listening – please continue" or "sure, I'll MAKE the time".

OUT of the wedding of opposites – doctrine, married to doing comes a kind of power, a conviction leading to humility – the more the conviction, the more the love. The more this is seen, felt, known, believed – the stronger the conviction, the more the practice of selfless-ness of willingness to put down the remote-control and listen – to stop snatching

at what is MINE, MINE, MINE... The modern doctrine is: “all fundamentalism is dangerous”. But what if the fundamental belief is that the almighty God is humble?

There’s a kind of loaded word – it’s used and claimed by all kinds of different people and factions and schools of thought, but I’m going to USE it today – it’s the word “ORTHO-praxy” – and what I mean by the word is the UNION of right doctrine (ortho-) and right practice.

As we see the beauty of God’s humility in Jesus Christ - “the humility of God embodied in human nature; the Eternal Love humbling itself, clothing itself in the garb of meekness and gentleness, to win and serve and save us” (Andrew Murray) – as we get caught up in that vision, we also worship, we want to raise our hands and bow our heads and sing – but far from making us navel-gazers and self-absorbed... it makes us liberated to love. The love of Christ compels us (2 Cor 5.14). We will FEEL loved and forgiven and cherished by the Almighty Humble God and we will feel like even a heroic act of forgiveness will be possible... a step toward another person will come naturally, organically – WHAT IS IT FOR ME to move ten feet or to step down from my rights when the Lover of my Soul has climbed highest mountain, has run through the fields, only to be with you...has crossed heaven and earth only to be with you!

It’s out of worship – it’s in the dogma that we find the drama and it moves us – when we see that God’s humility will WIN and that every knee will bow to it and every tongue confess that this Humble King is Lord – when I see it and feel it – when I worship that I begin to practice this kenosis – I can quit grasping and protecting MINE...my resentment, my sense of being wronged, my tastes, my preferences, my time – (man, who do we think we are?) – Has not the way of the pale Galilean taught us and MOVED us to humble ourselves, to entrust ourselves in to the hands of the Father and leave the outcome with Him – an outcome always fantastically beyond what we dare to imagine?

I’ve shared it before (around Christmas time) but a movie I can recommend unconditionally – I will give a spoiler, but the joy is in the journey so see it anyway. It’s called *The Straight Story*...

An old man named Alvin Straight. He was an Iowa farmer but now he’s old, really bad eyesight, diabetes, two bad hips. He walks with two canes; bad lungs from smoking... He’s widowed; he’s a simple man, quiet. Can’t drive a car any more but he’s pretty

happy in his old broken down farmhouse living with his mildly mentally disabled daughter.

Then he learns that his older brother Lyle has had a stroke and may die. And Alvin and Lyle haven't spoken in ten years - there's bad blood! And Alvin knows, it's now or never – he wants to make peace before one of them dies...

'Problem is: Alvin lives in Iowa and Lyle lives in Mt. Zion Wisconsin – 370 miles away. No buses. He doesn't have a car or a friend who can drive him. So he takes his old, rusty riding mower; hitches a little plywood trailer to it and sets out... meets people all along the way...a few miles per hour, camps at night ...meets more people...a few miles per hour...eats hotdogs and sleeps in that little plywood trailer and SIX weeks later...he drives that old riding mower down the last, long dirt road and takes his two canes...and hobbles up to a tiny old broke down house...and he calls out, "Lyle!"

And after a long time a man in a walker appears at the door with an angry scowl on his face. Its Lyle...he looks mean. He focuses on his brother... and they sit, awkward and tense on the shabby porch...and the Lyle looks out and sees that lawn mower... when his eyes focus he asks, "Did you ride that, all the way to see me."

"I did."

And Lyle's eyes fill with tears and his face changes and gets tender – the vehicle says it all. The vehicle says this offer of peace is very sincere.

This is it. Look at the Vehicle. See how serious God is and sincere about this offer of peace. Take Him up on it - it'll change your face ...It'll allow you to follow Him *in the Way of humility*, the Way that is only possible for those who receive the love of the Humble God who emptied Himself for us.