

What Does the Lord Require?

The Heart of a Servant

Philippians 2:1-11

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Back in the early 1990s Queen Elizabeth made a visit to the United States for an official state visit. But she didn't simply pack a suitcase and a carry-on bag and hop on a plane to come here. For her ten day trip she brought about 4000 pounds of luggage (which would probably amount to just a few fees in today's airline market!). Her luggage included two outfits for every occasion on her schedule, a funeral outfit in case such an occasion arose, forty pints of plasma in case of a medical emergency, and her own personal toilet seat covers made out of white kid leather. In addition to the security detail and her office staff, she was also accompanied by her own hairdresser, two valets, and a whole host of other attendants. The cost for her short visit to the U.S. was somewhere in the neighborhood of \$20 million.¹

We might be tempted to think that such extravagance is limited to royalty. But we've seen similar self-indulgence recently in corporate America. Just days after the federal government stepped in to rescue insurance giant AIG, several of its executives went to a spa for a lavish retreat with their spouses. Even after being admonished by congress, some of those same executives took another business trip to Las Vegas, where they rented the most expensive suites. Both of those trips were at a cost in the tens of thousands of dollars, money that had been injected into the company by the taxpayers.

And then just the other day the CEOs of the Big Three automakers were photographed getting off of their companies' private jets on their way to ask Congress for \$25 billion in bailout money. Even though they were simply following company policy that required them to use the jets instead of commercial airlines, none of the CEOs indicated that it would be appropriate to reconsider that policy as a cost-cutting measure, even while cutting the jobs of ordinary working men and women was on the table.

If you scratch beneath the surface of the corporate crisis that America faces right now, I suspect you will find a sense of privilege and entitlement that has people clamoring for prestige and status. I believe one of the biggest problems that has corrupted our society is a self-centeredness that cries out "me first" at all costs. As a result there is a weakness in the fabric of our culture; we are more fragmented and less united.

There was a similar mindset in the Roman world in which Paul lived. Roman culture valued power, competition, privilege, honor-seeking. What Paul lifts up in Philippians as the Christian lifestyle is diametrically opposed to what the world suggests as the model for right living. You see, Paul recognized that the prevailing mindset of the society around the Christians in Philippi would not be conducive to unity in the church or for effective and faithful discipleship. And so Paul urged a different mindset among followers of Christ--a mindset defined not by power and greed, but by selflessness and humility.

In the world "we are inundated with narratives that promise life found in superior force, in acquiring the best looks, the best bank accounts, the best weapons, the best 'stuff.' We are told that life is secured by

our winning--socially, economically, politically, religiously--and everybody else losing."² Paul urged the followers of Christ in Philippi--and his words urge us today--to adopt the attitude of a servant.

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit," says Paul, "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."³ You see, Paul knew that the mindset of the world won't fly in the church. Paul knew that if the church is to be faithful in our discipleship, then we must adopt for ourselves a different mindset. If we are to be faithful in proclaiming the radical love and grace of Jesus Christ, then we need to have in us the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus.

Today is Christ the King Sunday in the Church calendar. We exalt Jesus as King of kings and Lord of Lords. But it is not through force or might against our will that Jesus has ascended the throne: it is through humility and obedience and love for God and humanity. It is humility that informed the ministry of Jesus Christ, for in humility he set aside all the trappings of his position and he gave himself as a servant for the sake of your redemption and mine. It is the humility of Jesus Christ that made his love and tenderness and compassion so remarkable. It is the humility of Jesus Christ that shows us what a life lived for God looks like.

Today is Dedication Sunday, the final official Sunday of our annual emphasis on stewardship. I deliberately chose this text from Philippians because, more than defining stewardship as a matter of writing a weekly check to the church, Paul helps us see that stewardship begins with our hearts. More than a specific act, stewardship arises out of an attitude in our hearts. Stewardship begins when our hearts are moved by the love and compassion of God. Being faithful stewards requires that we allow our hearts to be transformed into the likeness of the heart of Christ. Stewardship is about responding in humility and gratitude to God by offering him our lives in his service. Stewardship is about living our lives in such a way that we act justly, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

As little Sarah and her family got out of the car at Grandma's house, the little girl cried out, "Mommy, I want to go to the cross!" There was a lighted cross high on a hill overlooking the lake at Grandma's house. Four-year-old Sarah was drawn by the beauty of the lights as they reflected on the lake. Even though she really didn't understand the gruesome nature of the cross, her Sunday School knowledge told her that the cross stood for something special about the love of Jesus. In childlike faith, she simply wanted to go to the cross.⁴

In his words to us this morning, Paul is telling us to go to the cross. He is telling us to travel the road of humility and servanthood. But it's not an arbitrary, random call to the cross that Paul is issuing to us today. It is a call to live our lives patterned after the life of Christ. Paul is telling us to travel the same road that Christ traveled, the road of complete love for and obedience to God. Paul is challenging us to have in our own lives the same attitude that was in the mind of Christ. And as we come to the Lord's table this morning, we are reminded that Jesus did not hold anything back, that Jesus gave everything for us. In your stewardship, don't hold anything back.

What does the Lord require of you? You know the answer--to act justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. And you can't do that, unless you consider your whole life as the realm of your stewardship. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 37.

² Brian Peterson, "Philippians 2:5-11," Interpretation, April 2004, p. 180.

³ Philippians 2:3-4

⁴ Susan Pendleton Jones, "The Obedient Son," The Christian Century, Sept. 8-13, 1999, p. 849.