

CHAPTER 6

Putting Jesus Back into Our Potential

Philippians 2:5-11



TWO DECADES AGO *TIME MAGAZINE* ANNOUNCED God's funeral. The announcement was nothing new, of course. More than a century ago Friedrich Nietzsche had already eulogized God's passing. Since God is dead and "no new god lies as yet in the cradle and swaddling clothes," there is no alternative except to face up to our meaningless existence. Now modern man must "rise from the ashes of former values and ideals" and define his own potential and will its fulfillment.¹

God's funeral wake has left us to ourselves. Fulfilling our own potential is now life's core occupation and our deepest need. Or so these secular, and sadly, too often, the religious pundits of pop culture would have us believe.

Evangelicals themselves have not totally escaped this frame of mind. Even if the evangelical community has not quite buried God, we certainly have tamed Him. We have refashioned Him into the image of an omnipotent

Friend or divine Psychologist who champions our full potential. This, in turn, has led to a new focus for measuring spirituality. Rather than for Christlikeness to be our goal, we now strive to reach “our full potential.” This is the new aim of spiritual growth. Much that passes for evangelicalism today is only a disguised form of self-worship. God is “little more than a narcissistic projection of [our] own needs and desires.”² We are preoccupied with self-fulfillment, not self-surrender.

Our Potential: Who Defines It?

The question is not whether we should seek our full potential. The question is, *What is that potential?* Who prescribes it for us? How do we know when we reach it?

Scripture defines that potential a bit differently than does our culture. The world pushes us to seek a potential that puts self at the center of our universe. The Bible declares that our potential is *discovered* in the Person of Jesus Christ, *measured* by Christlikeness and *pursued* through participation in the gospel. Conforming our lives to Christlikeness *is* seeking our potential. We call this the process of sanctification. Philippians 2:5-11 informs us how to define, aspire to and measure our full potential as Christians:

Your attitude should be the same as that of 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!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth
and under the earth,
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Putting the Mind of Christ Back into Our Potential

Pride and envy had taken its toll on the Philippian church. The congregation was ill. The antidote: a clear-cut decision to stop thinking of themselves and to focus on the needs of others (2:3-4). Living for something greater than our own well-being produces unity and harmony. It restores the health of the corporate body and produces spiritual growth and persevering joy among its individual members.

Throughout Church history there have been numerous interpretations of the term *sanctification* and as many suggested methods of achieving it. But those closest to biblical testimony recognize that our sanctification is a divine initiative whereby the Author of our salvation fills every facet of our beings with Himself.³ This is exactly the direction Paul takes us in our text. He exhorts us to put Jesus Himself back into our sanctification.

The text indicates that our sanctification and the recovery of the Church’s health are a community project: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (2:5). Do not let our English word *your* lull you into thinking Paul is merely addressing the individual. Of course, each individual must own the exhortation. But the *your* is

inclusive. The emphasis is on the church as a whole. In order to heal the illness caused by selfishness, Paul exhorts the entire congregation to manifest Jesus' attitude—*His* thinking toward each other.

Think among yourself what Christ Jesus also thought. Let your bearing, your attitude, your disposition, your thoughts toward one another be what Jesus manifested” (2:5, author’s paraphrase).

In other words, put the mind of Christ back into your sanctification.

Philippians 2:6-11 both explains the mind of Christ and illustrates its application to our lives. The passage is known as the Christ-hymn. The words affirm for the Church His preexistence and His deity. The immediate issue for us, however, is to determine how this hymn text furthers Paul’s overall purpose in his letter. How do these words slay the self-life and move us toward a healthier church and joyous spirituality?

The text affirms the deity of Jesus.⁴ It is precisely because of His deity that His example is paramount for initiating and molding our sanctification. Philippians 2:6-11 *is* the Christian life. Jesus *is* the measure of our potential.

Having the Mind of Christ Means Adding to Our Potential

Likely you have heard the remark, “We no longer have heroes, we have celebrities.” Have you considered the difference between a hero and a celebrity? Both are models for others to emulate. Each considers his or her potential. But there the similarities end.

You can tell celebrities because they gain from their celebrity status (whether power, wealth or fame). You can

tell heroes because they lose something and others gain. Celebrities must be preoccupied with their own potential or they will lose their celebrity status. Heroes care not about themselves; their attention is on others.

Is it any wonder we have produced a very self-centered society? It is the price of modeling ourselves after celebrities. Imitating heroes, on the other hand, will diminish our narcissism (in and outside the church). It will enable us to gain once more a proper view of our potential and its fulfillment.

We do not have to search far for a hero to emulate. Jesus Himself is much more than an earthly hero. His attitude and actions provide us the highest possible model as we seek to fulfill our potential. “Being in very nature God, [he] 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” (2:6-7).

Voluntarily Relinquish Your Rights

For Christians, the issue is not whether Jesus is God (we know He is!), but what He did as God. At first glance it looks as if Jesus conceded His position as God, laying aside His deity in order to take the place of a servant. But this is not quite Paul’s idea.⁵

The word *himself* (2:7) is the direct object of the verb *made (nothing) (emptied, NASB)*. In English, word order is important to communication. It is not as important in Greek. Greek writers positioned words in different places to help readers (who invariably read out loud) to hear a special point, a parallel thought or an emphasis. The Greek word order is “Himself He made nothing.” If you read it aloud, you can almost hear it. The priority of *Him* gives the impression that Jesus voluntarily “made Himself nothing.”

Here is the full sense of 2:6-7: “Jesus *voluntarily* made Himself nothing by becoming a servant, being made

in the likeness of men, precisely *because* He was God” (author’s translation and emphases). Jesus did not treat His equality with God as an excuse for selfishness. Rather, He turned away from His potential in glory precisely because it was to our advantage for Him to do so.

Add the Attribute of a Servant

The NIV translators used the words *made himself nothing* rather than the more familiar *emptied Himself* (NASB). Obviously they were attempting to circumvent what appears to be a vague statement about “emptying.” Of what did Jesus “empty” Himself? He emptied Himself of His glory, His throne, His majesty, His almighty attributes of omnipotence and omnipresence, His supremacy. Such suggestions are hardly necessary. There is no real need to complete Paul’s thought.

The idea of “emptying” (i.e., making Himself nothing) is simply that Jesus poured Himself out by becoming a servant. Jesus did not consider that being God gave Him the right to consider His own potential. Instead, He poured Himself out. He put Himself totally at the disposal of others (1 John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 8:9).

It is often perceived that the Christian life consists of “giving up,” “forsaking,” “abandoning,” “relinquishing.” Many look upon it as a life of subtractions. Although abandoning sinful activity or attitudes is necessary, perhaps we have portrayed the Christian life in reverse. If Jesus is the model for Christian living, then this portrait of Him in Philippians 2 indicates that Christian sanctification is not a process of subtraction—diminishing our potential—but of *adding to* our potential. The question is, *What are we to add?*

What Advantage Can I Give?

When Jesus became human He did not stop being God. As the One fully equal with the Father in deity and glory, He

took on—He added—the attributes of a servant. Jesus, the King of glory, the almighty, powerful, everlasting true God, became a servant. It is not a question of what we should give up. Rather, how can we take what we have (our abilities, skills, talents, education, money, business acumen, creativity, even social status) to serve others for the sake of the gospel? For us to fulfill our potential, the question we must ask is this: “What advantage can I give to the Church and to the cause of the gospel *because* of who I am and what I have?”

The reference to *servant* in 2:7 is significant. Many years ago I conducted a Sunday school class on discipleship. Throughout the sessions I referred to disciples as slaves of Christ. After one class a man reproved me. “I am not a slave to Jesus,” he protested. “I am not under compulsion. I freely give myself to Him. I am a servant, not a slave. To call me a slave is to demean my love for God and lower my loyalty to Him as mere conscripted service.” His point was well taken.

Many translations (the NIV included) give the sense of “servant” when translating the Greek word *doulos*. Our service and love is to be voluntary. But we must not miss the connotation the Greek word *doulos* had in Jesus’ and Paul’s day.

At that time there were but three classes of people: the rich, the poor and the slaves. When we hear the word *servant*, we think of a paid staff person—perhaps a maid, a butler, a cook, a chauffeur. Servants of the first century would have had no such privileges. Society granted them no rights or privileges. A slave was fully dependent on and submissive to his or her owner. When Jesus relinquished His potential in glory for the incarnation, He took on Himself the attitude of a slave. And as such, Jesus put Himself in a position where He had no rights granted by society. His only right was the fulfillment of the Father’s will. He had no privileges except the honor of being His Father’s servant.

We are called to voluntarily add to our own potential the attitude of a slave. We are called to be people without rights save God's will, people without privileges save God's honor. We are to be fully at the disposal of others. We are to sacrifice our potential for the interests of others (cf. 2:3-4). The mind of Christ moves us beyond saying "I have a need" to saying, "I volunteer my services to meet your need."

Having the Mind of Christ Will Produce Useful Obedience

Is there a difference between plain obedience and *useful* obedience? I am making the distinction because being good is not enough. Following Christ is not just a call to believe and be good. Following Christ means believing and being good *for something*. Look again at the text: "Being found in appearance as a man, [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (2:8).

As a Man, Jesus did not manifest merely a moral, good life. His life was also characterized by obedience. The great tragedy of the modern, "relevant," practical gospel of today, someone remarked, "is in calling many to belief but few to obedience."⁶

Is it any wonder that the Church is weak and that countless Christians wander aimlessly in search of meaning, self-esteem and self-potential? The gospel no longer calls people to repent, believe and obey. Now the appeal is, "Come to Christ and better yourselves," or "Come to Christ because God wants you to live up to your potential." Such exhortations fit our culture, but they are a far cry from what Paul urges in 2:6-8.

James D. Hunter, a University of Virginia sociologist, has written extensively on evangelicalism. He observes: "A total reversal has taken place in the evangelical conception of the nature and value of the self." Sixty-two percent of evangelical college students agree with the statement: "For the Christian, realizing your full potential as a

human being is just as important as putting others before you." Sadly, this reflects a similar attitude among the evangelical community as a whole. More than half agree with the statement: "The purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment."⁷

I appreciate frankness. But I am alarmed by this perception of the Christian life. Can you imagine if Jesus had held to this attitude? All prospects of Bethlehem and Calvary would have ended in the mind of God. Jesus did not consider His own potential in glory as something to be weighed alongside a ministry to sinners, to those under God's judgment.⁸

Submit to Sacrificial Obedience

When Jesus added the attributes of a slave to His potential, He had a purpose in mind. Having the mind of Christ means that all we are—all our potential—is placed at God's disposal for the advantage of others.

Relatively few witnessed the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. But most North Americans (and indeed people in other nations) lived the nightmare vicariously through the television pictures of rescue workers picking their way through the shattered building in search of victims. If those courageous rescuers had been considering their personal potential, they might not have risked their lives to save as many as possible.

It seems that today's evangelical pulpites and writers would have us conclude that sanctification leads to a place where the believer can be comfortable with himself or herself and fits nicely in our democracy. Rather, sanctification ought to lead us to the place where our potential can be sacrificed for the welfare of others. That is Paul's point. Jesus gave up His potential by placing Himself in a position of vulnerability, of service. Obedience to the point of death does not necessarily mean martyrdom. It is an obedience

that exchanges any consideration of our personal potential for the welfare of others.

Aim at Redemptive Obedience

Paul adds a phrase to the original hymn: “even death on a cross!” Our obedience has aim, it has purpose. We have something to be obedient for, namely, the redemption of others. Not only does the Christ-life motivate us to live beyond our personal potential, the mind of Christ also provides direction for our obedience.

“Houston, We Have a Problem”

The words “Houston, we have a problem” bring back suspense-filled memories. I was only a kid, but I remember vividly the potentially tragic Apollo 13 mission. While three men were on their way to the moon, a series of events led to a near-fatal situation. Power was dwindling. Oxygen was in short supply. Their lives were being held in the balance.

Back in Houston Command Center, hundreds of men and women put their potentials on hold. They sacrificed sleep, personal time, energy. They harnessed talents and creativity. They forfeited natural rights and pleasures. All to bring three men back from the moon alive. They did it!

Our obedience to Christ is governed by God’s redemptive purposes, the gospel. We have more than just three men whose lives are in the balance, who have lost their way. Are we making redemptive choices regarding our time, energy, creativity, potential? Are we harnessing what we have and who we are, adding the attribute of a servant for the redemptive purpose of God?

All of us face the dilemma of being stressed beyond the limit and stretched too thin. How do we determine when to say yes and when to say no to the countless time- and energy-consuming ventures of obedience and service? The answer lies in 2:8. Just because someone comes up with an

idea as to how we can serve does not mean we are obligated to say yes. The text suggests that *we* see the needs and opportunities. We harness our potential and become obedient for the sake of others, especially for the sake of their redemption.

Is our relationship with Christ producing His attitude of humble service to others? Are we willing to sacrifice our potential—whether intellectual, athletic, business, political—in order to play a decisive, redemptive role in the lives of others? If so, we are progressing in our sanctification!

The Mind of Christ Means Pursuing God’s Glory, Not Our Self-esteem

We confuse our culture’s preoccupation with fulfillment with God’s call to joyful obedience. The reasoning goes something like this: God wants me to be the best I can be *for Him*. I can’t be my best unless I have a healthy self-image. I can’t have a healthy self-image unless I build my self-esteem.

Most people link self-esteem to discovering and then realizing the fulfillment of their potential. I do not suggest we should ignore our insecurities and disappointments. When we develop basic *trust*—security—and have *real accomplishment*, we can change how we feel about ourselves. We can resist the demeaning things others say about us. We can withstand the false expectations placed on us.⁹

You ask, “Where can I find this trust?” “What is real accomplishment?” Our text provides the answers to those questions too:

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow,*

*in heaven and on earth
and under the earth,
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (2:9-11)*

These verses inform us of Christ's exaltation and lordship over all things. None of us, of course, will experience this type of exaltation. What, then, do these verses mean? What purpose do they serve in Paul's exhortation to have the mind of Christ?

Allow for God's Vindication

This "exaltation" and the giving of a "name" speak of the resurrection of Jesus (cf. Ephesians 1:20-21; Acts 2:32-33; 5:30-31). We often turn to the resurrection as another proof of Jesus' deity. Although it is a proof of His deity, it serves a further apologetic purpose. It also proclaims to the world: "This Jesus, whom you thought to be a fool, a criminal, a traitor, a lunatic, whom you nailed to a cross, is really none of these. He is Messiah!" (see Acts 2:36). His appearance as a humble servant veiled His deity. But now everyone can see He is the King. The resurrection is God's way of saying, "Everybody was wrong, and Jesus was right!"

Although it looked foolish—or even unwise—at the time, Jesus' obedience to God's redemptive purpose was vindicated when He was resurrected. Likewise, in today's world, with all the expectations of self-fulfillment and success, setting aside one's potential can seem self-abasing, senseless, even ridiculous. That's because the Christian measure of a fulfilled life, a life lived to its full potential, is different from the standards and expectations set by our culture.

Jesus trusted God to exalt Him—to vindicate His obedience. We too can trust God to do the same. Peter reminds us:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:21-23)

Our energy, creativity, and time are not to be wasted on pursuing what we suppose our potential is. God will vindicate our lives lived in humble obedience to His redemptive purposes. That is the trust that provides the security we need for healthy self-respect.

Hunger for the Glory of God

The devil was the first to promote the idea of human potential. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent misled Adam and Eve into wrongly reaching for their full potential. "God knows that when you eat of [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). Adam and Eve forgot that God's purpose for them was to live for His glory—His pleasure (cf. Philippians 2:13, NASB)—not the fulfilling of their potential.

When we live for God's glory rather than for our perceived potential, we will be more stable. We will be more persevering. We will have more abundant joy. Jesus' death on the cross did not hinder His potential. Just as Jesus hungered for the glory of God, so must we. Therein is the "real accomplishment" we need in order to build healthy self-respect.

As my college graduation approached, I anticipated a call to be the pastor of discipleship at a rather large church. Already I had established an active discipleship program and a singles' ministry. But I was passed over—for

a minister of music! I felt rejected, abused, confused and hurt. Afterward I enrolled in a good seminary where I thought my talents would shine. But I discovered that I was just one among a hundred shining students.

A Menial Job—Cleaning Toilets

Through my seminary years I worked part-time to help support my family. My job consisted of the two things I despise more than anything on earth: cleaning and vacuuming. I was a janitor. Already I was a wreck emotionally. The combination of being a nobody at school and a janitor for a daycare center made things worse. *I felt I was not fulfilling my potential.*

One day while cleaning a toilet I got angry at God. Slamming the sponge down into the toilet bowl, I said, “I am a preacher, a teacher. And here I am cleaning toilets!” I protested not getting the church position. I complained about not preaching. My insecurities matched my “unfulfilled potential.” I knew I was dealing with pride, but I thought my complaint was justified because I did have gifts, you know!

In the midst of my tantrum, God brought to my mind a sermon illustration I had heard back at college. The preacher recalled the story of a rather well-to-do graduate student who finished top of his class with a doctorate. He felt called to the ministry, and a rather prestigious Philadelphia congregation invited him to be their pastor. But the young man felt called to work with William Booth in England. So he left America to apply for a ministry with the Salvation Army.

At the interview, Mr. Booth told the young man there was no place for him. His education and wealthy-status would hinder him from taking orders from street preachers, some of them former drunks and prostitutes. But the young man was persistent, and Mr. Booth gave him a try.

He sent him to a dark, dingy cellar to clean and shine the muddy boots of the street preachers.

After a while, it occurred to the young man that indeed he might be wasting his talents and gifts. “You call yourself a servant of God,” the devil seemed to be saying, “but look at you. You’re squandering all you have to offer.” The man thought of the Philadelphia pulpit he had turned down. But as those thoughts danced in his head, another Voice whispered, “It’s all right. I washed their feet too.”

My Ego, Not My Potential, Was Offended

There at my daycare janitorial job, I realized the issue was pride and my false sense of fulfillment. It was my ego that had been offended, not my potential.

The United States and Canada have close to 300 million “most important persons in the whole world.”¹⁰ Logic would suggest someone’s potential is going to be sacrificed. The mind of Christ turns this idea *right-side-up*. We must consider that the pursuit of our potential might actually be a disadvantage for others and a hindrance to the gospel. It is not self-fulfillment but self-submission that God desires.

But you say, “If I give myself to sacrificial obedience, I could be put in a position where I was taken advantage of. I could be used and, even worse, abused.” That possibility exists. And it happens far too often. The solution is not to reject the biblical text and shrink from sacrificial service to others. The solution is to exercise the mind of Christ. Each of us has limited time, energy and resources. We should be selective. The Christ-hymn of Philippians 2 supplies the appropriate elements for the decision-making process.

- What’s at stake? Realizing *my* full potential or the redemptive advantage of another?
- What’s really being sacrificed? My rights? My

privileges? My potential? My pride?

- How will my decision further the cause of the gospel?
- Who else will be affected by my decision?
- How will my decision affect my church? Will it build up the congregation? Will it weaken the church?
- Which decision will bring most glory and honor to God?

Endnotes

¹ See Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Counter Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 22-23; also see Paul Johnson's chapter, "Relativistic Times," in *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), especially 47-48.

² Paul Vitz, "Leaving Psychology Behind," in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, Os Guinness and John Seel, eds. (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1993), 108.

³ For example, see A.B. Simpson, "Wholly Sanctified," in *The Best of A.B. Simpson*, compiled by Keith M. Bailey (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1987), 47-58. For a fuller discussion of the various views on sanctification, see Donald Alexander, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988).

⁴ For a fuller discussion on the issues of Jesus' deity, preexistence and humanity contained in this text, see Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 43, *Philippians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983) and Moises Silva, *Philippians* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1988); see also Peter O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) and Ralph Martin, *Philippians* (Greenwood, SC: The Attic Press, Inc., 1976).

⁵ Hawthorne, 85. Hawthorne discusses why Jesus did not concede His position in glory but rather, because He was

God, poured Himself out on behalf of others.

⁶ Cited in *Beyond Cultural Wars: Is America a Mission Field or Battlefield?* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), 64; see Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), 53; also the surveys in the appendix of David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 228-256.

⁷ Hunter, 53

⁸ Wells, 201.

⁹ Paul Vitz (see note 2), 97-98.

¹⁰ Ibid.