



Paul's letter to the

PHILIPPIANS

LESSON 3

PHILIPPIANS 1:27-2:11

HEARING AND BECOMING THE STORY

It would be difficult to find a more influential passage in all of Scripture than today's reading from Philippians. Often called "the Christ Hymn" (2:6-11), on the supposition that Paul is quoting at least in part a very early hymn from the worship of the church, these verses have generated and shaped conversations about the nature of Christ's humanity and divinity, his saving work, and its relationship to the Christian life.

This is the story of God with us, told from the standpoint of his incarnation as a slave. Paul begins by giving us a glorious picture of citizenship in the kingdom of heaven, and of the boldness and freedom of Paul's and the Philippians' witness to the gospel (1:27-2:4).

Then we hear of Christ himself taking the form of a slave, humbling himself even to the point of death by crucifixion — the execution reserved for slaves and traitors in the Roman Empire. Paradoxically, our freedom comes from Christ's voluntary bondage, which is his entry into our bondage. This movement by Christ is the heartbeat of the call that begins and ends today's passage. If we want to become like Christ, we begin by hearing how Christ became like us, and continues to come among us. Then, and only then, are we ready to hear about "the imitation of Christ."

The movement in this drama is one of *descent* and *ascent*: First it tells of Christ's descent from a position of being in the form of God and equal with God, to being in the form of a slave, in the likeness of human beings, in the appearance of a singular human being, obedient even to the point of death by crucifixion. Having been raised on a cross, Christ is exalted even higher by God, so that all creation will bow down and confess him as Lord.

The drama of salvation enacted by Christ (2:6-11) and embedded in calls to act in ways that mirror Christ's humiliation, service, and obedience (2:1-5, 12-13), is a kind of street theater that involves the audience in the action. This is not a television show or a movie; it is not virtual reality; it is God's action in the flesh, invading our worlds, catching us up into the saving work of God, making us also participants, actors in the drama.

- Dr. Susan Eastman (Duke Divinity), "God with Us"

A Practice for Reading Scripture

The steps of this practice intend to promote deeper communion with God. This discipline helps us to blend Scripture and prayer together through four different steps: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Consider using this practice with our weekly text from Philipians.



1. Read

Begin with a minute of silence. Read the passage at least twice, slowly and carefully. Listen attentively for a word or phrase that seems to be given to you, a word that draws you to it. What sticks out to you? *If you are doing this with a group, you can invite members to speak aloud the one word or phrase that the Spirit has given them, without explanation or discussion.*



2. Meditate

Think about the reading and connect it to your life. Read the passage again and allow the Spirit to bring to your mind and heart an experience or issue that you are facing right now that seems to connect to the word or phrase that stood out to you in the initial readings. Do not force it, just allow it to emerge. *If you are doing this with a group, you can invite members to briefly share where their word or phrase connects with their life right now.*



3. Pray

Respond to God based on your meditation. Ask God to lead you to deeper understanding. Consider journaling or keeping record of your response. You might ask questions, give thanks, confess, or ask God for what you need in this moment. Is God inviting you to something? Listen for an invitation.



4. Contemplate

Sit quietly and rest in God's presence. Be present to God, enjoying God's presence without the use of words. Listen quietly with your heart for God's response. At the end of your time of silence, give thanks to God for this time of communion. Go into the world with peace and confidence, knowing that God is working in you, giving you the power to do what pleases him (Phil 2:13). *If you are doing this with a group, at the end of your time of silence, invite them to share the invitation they heard from God.*

Philippians 1:27-2:11 (NIV)

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

2 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, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 1:27–2:4

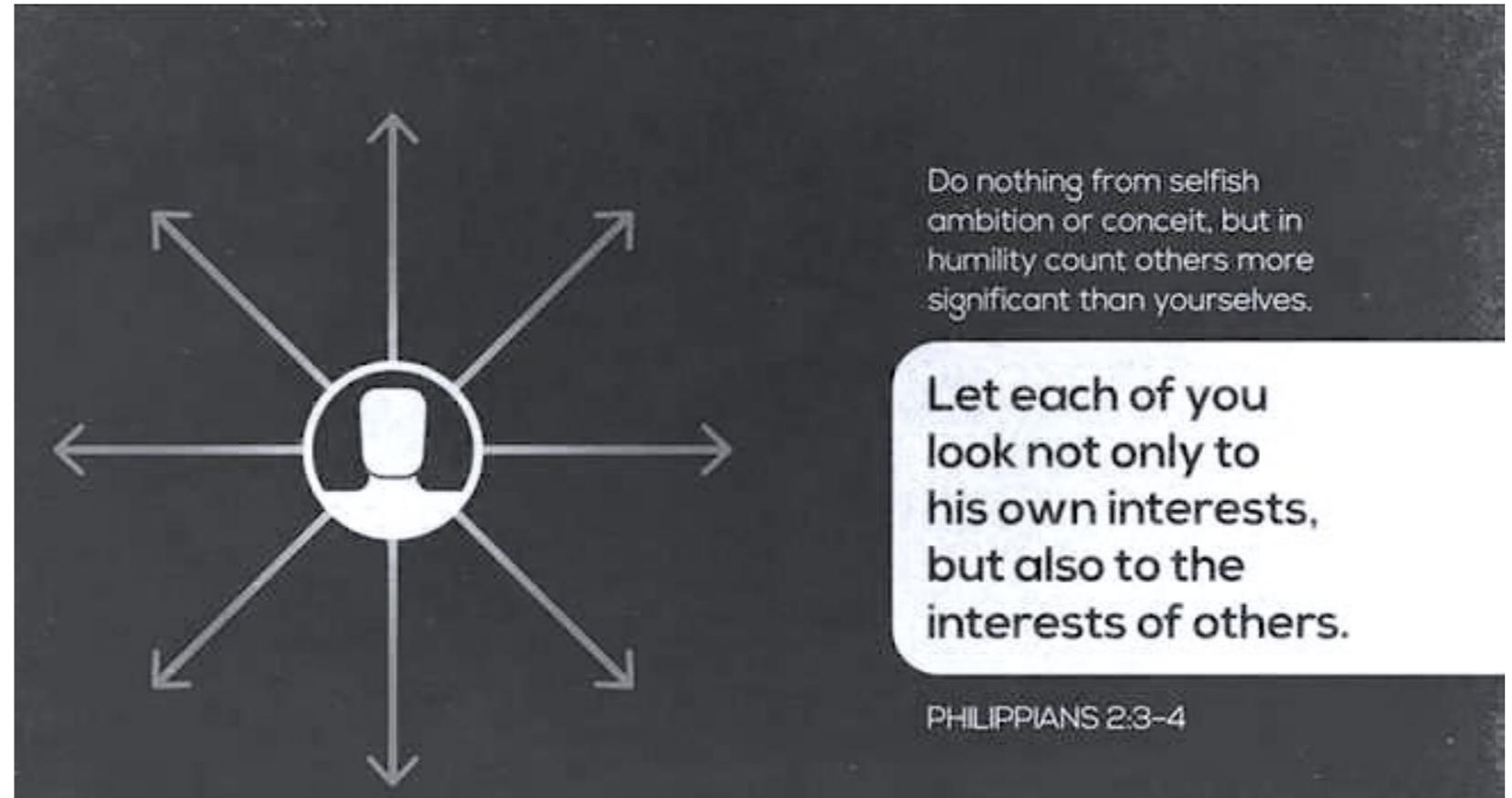
In 1:27, Paul turns to give advice on how the Philippians should live their lives. His words here are central to the letter.

The Philippians are to stand firm, united in the faith, whatever happens. They will be sharing the sufferings of the Messiah—and of Paul himself. Readers are to live “in a manner worthy of the gospel” (1:27); to “look to the interests of others” (2:4). What Paul is anxious to do is to instill an attitude—the attitude of Christ himself, set out in 2:5-11.

This short passage reveals three hopes that Paul has for the Philippian community: that their life together be worthy of the gospel; that they stand firm and united in their sharing of the gospel; and that they not be intimidated by opposition.

In other words, Paul wants them to continue to share the gospel with their lives and their words, to continue becoming and telling the story of Christ despite persecution.

The Philippians are to stand firm in the Spirit (1:27), and their unity with one another should flow in part from their own experience of the fellowship that the Spirit brings about (2:1).



They are commanded to be “likeminded,” and to have “the same love,” and to unite in “spirit and purpose” (2:2).

They are to avoid “selfish ambition,” but “in humility value others above [themselves]” (2:3), as they “look...to the interests of others” (2:4).

On the one hand, the Philippians’ unity appears to flow from the Spirit; on the other, it also seems to come from the determined effort of the Philippians themselves.

Ultimately, Paul sees them as a group of individuals, who, despite their differences, are willing to show love for one another through putting the well-being of others first. This will always mean speaking and acting on the truth, but doing so in love. It also means having the humility to admit when we have spoken or acted without love and then to mend our ways.

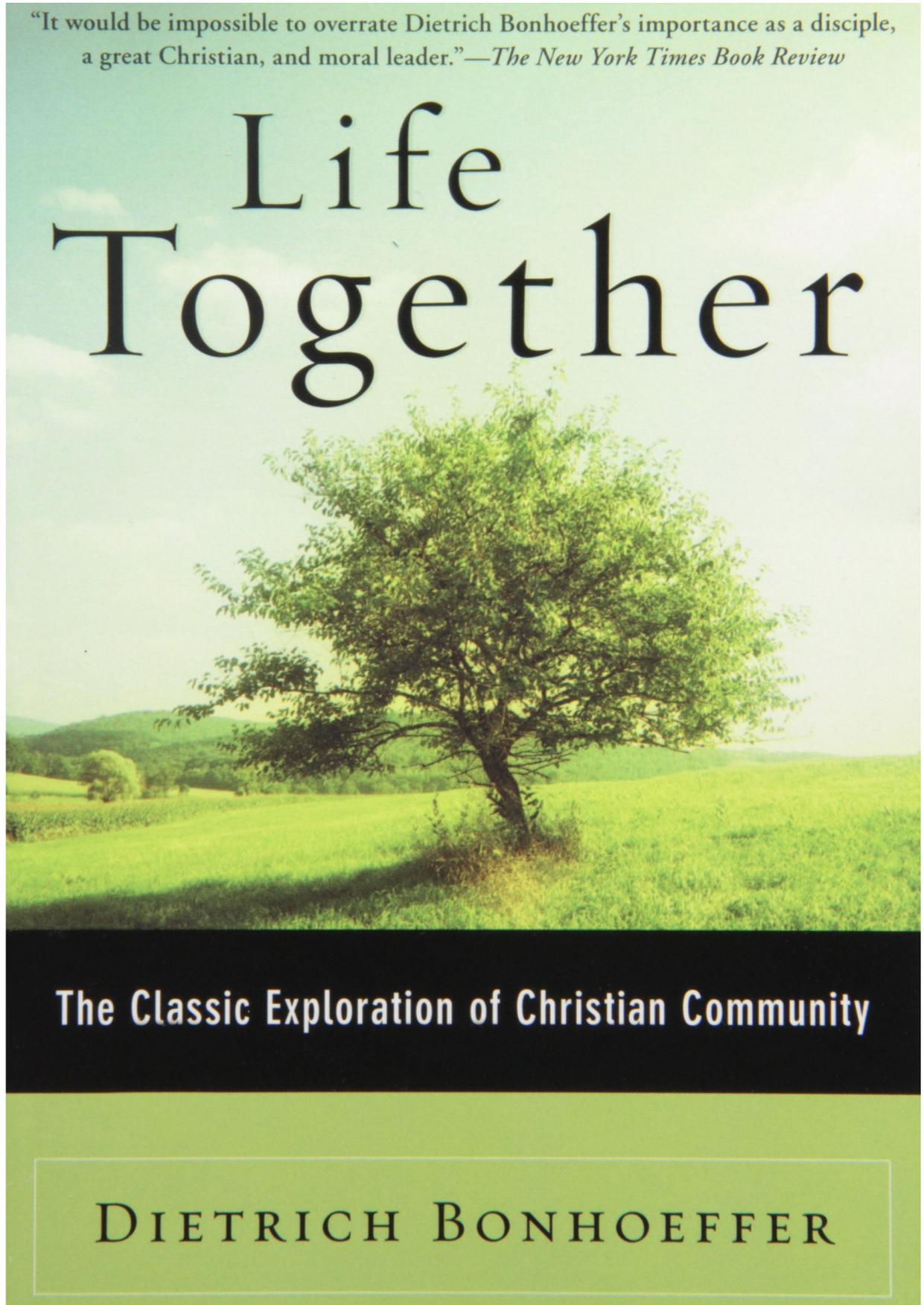
As each believer looks out for the interests of others, all will move toward cultivating the mindset and “attitude...of Christ Jesus” (2:5) in their community, which is in fact a community in Christ Jesus.

Life Together

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (Philippians 2:3).

In his essay on how Christians should live together, Dietrich Bonhoeffer prescribes seven principles for removing selfish ambition and self-focus from Christian communities (90-109). Christians, he says, should:

1. Hold their tongues, refusing to speak unkindly about a Christian brother or sister.
2. Cultivate the humility that comes from understanding that they, like Paul, are the greatest of sinners and can only live in God’s sight by his grace.
3. Listen “long and patiently” so that they will understand their fellow Christian’s need.
4. Refuse to consider their time and calling so valuable that they cannot be interrupted to help with unexpected needs, no matter how small or menial.
5. Bear the burden of their brothers and sisters in the Lord, both by preserving their freedom and by forgiving their abuse of that freedom.
6. Share God’s word to fellow believers when they need to hear it.
7. Understand that Christian authority is characterized by service and does not call attention to the person who performs the service.



Philippians 2:5-11

Paul's previous request for unity among his readers is to be achieved by actively cultivating certain virtues—particularly those connected with learning to think as Jesus thought. Their union with Jesus is the ground for such character-development.

When Paul calls them to imitate the Messiah's own virtues, he offers them a short poem/hymn, perhaps the earliest statement we possess of a Christian view of Jesus. Some things can only be said in poetic language; perhaps this is one of them. And it provides the foundation for the challenge to self-sacrificing unity.

The poem depicts Jesus' life in three stages: **pre existence (2:6)**, **incarnation (2:7-8)**, and **exaltation (2:9-11)**. The weight of the poem rests on the decision (of the one who was all along equal with God) to become human, and to travel the road of obedience to the divine saving plan all the way to the cross. Consider the key affirmations that Paul makes about Christ in verses 6-8:

1. He was in the form of God, which meant he possessed equality with God;
2. He did not consider this equality as something to use for his own advantage;
3. Instead of using his equality with God for his own advantage, he did two similar things: he "emptied himself" and he "humbled himself";
4. His self-emptying consisted of taking the "form of a slave," that is, being born as a human rather than retaining his status of equality ("being in the form of") God;
5. After emptying himself (that is, while he was in this "form" of a slave/human, in contrast to being in the form of God), in similar fashion he "humbled himself";
6. His self-humbling consisted of becoming obedient to God to the point of dying, even dying by crucifixion.

Just as the theme of humility looms large in Philippians 2:1-5, it is the centerpiece of the poem of 2:6-11. Humility was regarded in the ancient world as weakness, the characteristic of inferiors and slaves who had been kicked down to the bottom rungs of society (see Reflection #1). Pagans usually prized (as most people still do) "honor" and "fame," but for the Messiah and his people, it is different.

Thus the reason Paul includes 2:6-11 is to remind the Philippians of the greatest example of humility: Christ Jesus did not exploit his status as one who was equal with God but rather "emptied himself" and "humbled himself" by becoming human. And he didn't just become human: he became obedient unto death on a cross. God exalted Christ Jesus (2:9-11), and Paul's hope likewise is in the power of Christ's resurrection (3:10-11). Paul wants his readers to absorb the story of Jesus, specifically the story of his humility, death, and exaltation, and to "work out" what their "salvation" is going to mean in practice (3:12).

"Let the same mind be in you," Paul tells the Philippians (2:5). What they, and we, are called to proclaim and perform is Paul's narrative about the crucified Jesus as the self-giving, life-giving Son of God and sovereign Lord. We are called to live, joyfully and painfully, in the story that is both theirs and ours. As we live the story we will be a missional people, each of us allowing our lives to be at God's use. To become the gospel is to allow Christ's story to become our story, and our time—as well as our energy and other resources—to become his in service of that good news.

Reflections

1

The Christ Hymn in the Roman World

Scholar Joseph Hellerman helps us look at the hymn within the context of the Roman Empire. He starts with the *cursus honorum*, or "course of honor," which was the formalized sequence of public offices that a young Roman aristocrat was to follow as he advanced in his career. At each stage the upwardly mobile young man gained new responsibilities and new privileges. Lower classes of people developed their own sequence of offices that mimicked the upper classes. Hellerman argues that the concern for such honor ratings and status was, if anything, greater than normal in Philippi, because the elites in Philippi were Roman and the city was a Roman colony often called "little Rome." The Christ Hymn, suggests Hellerman, has taken the *cursus honorum* and turned it upside down. Instead of climbing the proverbial corporate ladder, Jesus descends it. For Paul's readers, Christ is their example of a life that is lived free of concern for status/honor and open to radical service to God.

2

Philippians and the Theme of Humility

In stark contrast to the surrounding culture, Paul urges the Philippians to do nothing out of selfish ambition, but rather to place the interests of others ahead of their own (2:3-4). He calls this attitude "humility" (2:3)—which is not the same thing as low self-esteem or thinking ill of oneself. *Humility refers to putting others first and consciously seeking what is best for others rather than what is best for oneself.* This is closely connected to what Paul means by "love" (Rom 12:10; 1 Cor 13:4-7), and it is also closely connected to what he means by people having "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). The call to humility as a defining mark of Christian character runs through all of Paul's letters, but it receives special attention in Philippians, and most of the letter can be read in light of this theme.

3

Coming Down to Our Level

Each of us faces difficulties and struggles in our lives, and this passage reminds us that our future, whatever it may hold, is in the hands of a God who came near—a God who came down to our level and knows our experience intimately. Jesus didn't elevate himself, but endured all of the human experience. Through Jesus experiencing the fullness of humanity, God experiences the fullness of humanity. In the context of those who are suffering, this is very important: God knows what temptation, suffering, and death feel like. God understands. God doesn't watch from a distance, but becomes an insider to suffering. This is a God who walks with us, comforts us, and lifts us up when we feel down and when we fall down, because God knows the experience personally. Instead of continuing on and ignoring humanity in its brokenness, God became one of us. In that act, we see the very identity of God—for God so loved the world that he gave.

4

Having the Same Mind as Christ Jesus

Though Jesus was God, he did not use his divine nature for self-advantage, but instead took on the nature of a servant. This self-giving is a divine act. This who God is and what God does. God is a self-giving God. This should also be who the church is and what the church does as we cultivate the mindset of Christ Jesus in our community (2:5). Through the dynamic of dying to self, we participate and share in the very life of Christ. As we empty ourselves for others' sake, we embody the true character and nature of God.

Be very intentional this week of emptying yourself of pride and self-focus – so that you are available to meet the needs of others. Try the "Jesus formula" — although you could do "(x)" [self-centered action], you choose instead to do "(y)" [self-giving action], taking on the form of servant, even to the point of sacrifice, for the benefit of another. At the end of the day, let God do the exalting (James 4:10).

Discussion

1. What's one of your favorite poems or songs? *Why* is it your favorite?
2. Why is it so important that Christians show unity in world that's so divided? What do you think our local community might say about the Christians who live in it? What are some elements, marks, or practices of Christian unity?
3. Paul's teaching in 1:27-2:4 challenges us to fight for unity within the community of faith. How can you personally contribute to unity within your community?
4. Drawing from this week's passage, who in your life has most clearly embodied the character of God?
5. What does it mean for Jesus to not exploit the privileges of being God?
6. What does it mean for human beings to be made in the image of God and how does Jesus restore and fulfill that image?
7. How does the story of Jesus—and his downward, cross-shaped journey—reshape your personal understanding of God?
8. What are some practical ways that you can love and prefer others in your home, work, or church above yourself? (Think about those whom it is hard for you to love). If the character of God is defined by self-sacrificial love, how can you embody that love for the people around you?