

“The Humble Servant”

There is a popular American television series called “Undercover Boss.” In each episode the CEO or President of a major company goes undercover, usually in disguise, and works at one of his/her stores. This person assumes the identity of a blue-collar worker and stays at the store for several weeks. The usual reason for this undercover operation is that the actual stores are having problems with profits and the boss wants to find out what is going on.

The boss has to become humble to find out what is going on with employees and with the business. Many times businesses have problems because of a lack of harmony or unity or employees setting their own agendas instead of doing what is best for the company.

A key part of the episode is the CEO interacting with other employees at the store. By doing this, the CEO learns what works at the store and where there are problems. The CEO figures out the good employees and the bad employees. Some of the employees offer good ideas which can help the company. The boss usually comes across one employee who is having a tough time in life.

At the end of the show, the CEO meets with several of the employees and reveals to them his/her true identity. The employees are surprised because they did

not know the boss' true identity. The boss rewards some employees by giving them better jobs and in some cases money towards their living expenses. The CEO also explains how he/she adopts ideas learned while working in the store. The CEO also meets with certain employees who are not good workers and tells them what they need to do to keep their jobs.

So, what does this television show have to do with our sermon lesson today from Philippians 2:5-11? In this passage we read about the incarnation of Jesus Christ, in which Jesus, a divine person, takes on human form and comes to live among the people. Like the CEO in "Undercover Boss," Jesus has to humble himself so he can take on human characteristics. By doing this, Jesus shows God to the people and is able to help them in their relationship to God.

This passage contains three main parts. First, there is the incarnation in which Jesus took on human form. Second, Jesus is obedient to God so that he dies on the cross. Third, because of what Jesus does, God exalts him, and he becomes the Lord over all creatures.

Paul exhorts the Philippians to have the mind of Christ. What is clear from this passage is that Jesus was humble. He was both divine and human. He was rich yet for our sakes he became poor. He did not, though, exploit his divine status. He always remained obedient to God. Contrast his attitude with that of Adam, who

wanted to be “Like God” and ended up disobeying God. Contrast Jesus’ attitude with Lucifer, who wanted to be “Like God” and ended up leading a rebellion against God.

Christ emptied himself to become human. He poured himself out. Paul uses the most vivid possible word to make clear to us the sacrifice of the incarnation. The serenity, the peace, the glory of divinity---Jesus gave them up, voluntarily and willingly, in order to become human. He emptied himself of his deity to take upon himself his humanity.

Paul writes that Jesus became like a slave. He was not an actual slave but when he took on human form he became like a slave. Being a slave in the Roman world was very humbling. People who were free would often agree to become slaves in a household so they could survive. It was a very humbling experience.

Slavery also has a very symbolic meaning. In Galatians 4 Paul writes that men and women are in slavery to cosmic forces. In Romans 5-7 Paul names these forces as sin, the law, and death.

Jesus took on the form of a servant. He was not play acting. He was not like the Greek Gods who sometimes, as the stories went, became men but kept their

divine privileges. Jesus really and truly became human. He could love and laugh and taste good food. He could also feel pain and death.

As part of his humility, Jesus was obedient to God and suffered death on a cross. This was the lowest possible status he could have. Crucifixion was reserved for disobedient slaves. One could not get any lower on the status scale.

Jesus' obedience to God's will was not easy. In Luke 22:42 he said, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, not my will but yours be done" Although he still acknowledged God's will, he still wanted out if possible. He went forward but the scriptures read that an angel was sent to give him strength.

Crucifixion was a terrible death. I have made a piece of art, a crucifix. It is done in a modern art style. My thought was to portray the anguish of Jesus. When you look at his face you can feel the pain he suffered. The way the wood is put together is meant to show the brokenness of his body.

This piece of art is imperfect. This is meant to contrast with the perfection of Christ. It is also meant to stand for the imperfections of the world. This crucifix was made from wood scraps in a friend's workshop. The scraps are what nobody wants. This stresses the humility of Jesus.

These scraps of wood have a special meaning They come from a tree which was in a church yard and was blown down in a storm. The wood from the tree could just have been thrown away and never used. However, despite the lowly status of the wood scraps, they have been used to create something which testifies to Christ's glory.

The great characteristics of Jesus' life were humility, obedience and self-renunciation. He did not desire to dominate people. He desired only to serve humans. Jesus won the hearts of people not by blasting them with power but by showing them a love, a self-sacrifice.

Although Christ did not do what he did for a reward, Paul writes in vv. 9-11 that after his obedience Christ was highly exalted by God. The self-renunciation of Jesus Christ brought him the greater glory. Again, and again the New Testament shows that only the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Eventually every creature in the universe would worship him. At his name every knee shall bow. He was given the name above all names. All creatures, spiritual powers, the living and the dead, bow and praise him.

So, what does this mean for you. Jesus provides a pattern of behavior for Christians today. We need to be humble. We must also be obedient to God's will in

our lives. As Paul later writes in Philippians 3:14, we need to: “Press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Part of being humble is being able to accept others as they come into the Christian congregation. Commentator William Barclay writes that the passage we study today is the most moving passage Paul ever wrote about Jesus. Paul is pleading with the Philippians to live in unity and harmony, to lay aside their differences, to shed their ambitions and their pride and their desire for prestige.

Christians need to have in their hearts that humble selfless desire to serve, which is the very essence of the life of Christ. Paul’s appeal for unity is to point to the example of Jesus Christ.

We must remember that Jesus himself accepted people from all walks of life, especially those who were not considered the best of society. Part of having the mind of Christ is the humility to fellowship with those who are less than perfect. This can be difficult in our American society.

Although our motivation should not be to receive an award, we know that God does give us eternal life. In “Undercover Boss,” the good workers were not necessarily expecting anything special in the end. However, because of their obedience and dedication to their jobs, they did receive a special reward at the end.

Some often receive an exalted status above what they had before. They received job promotions or pay raises.

The great thing Jesus did for us was to humble himself and take on human form as John relates in John 1:14. Jesus took on the human experiences of love, hate, sacrifice, suffering, and ultimately death. Only through his humility and obedience could humans experience the grace of God.

By being children of God, we know we will have eternal life in God's new heaven and new earth as we read in Revelation 21. In Christ's new kingdom after he returns, we read there will be no more death and no more pain. What a wonderful reward for all because of the humility and suffering which Jesus endured.

As we close out this passage, it is clear from Paul's writing that the purpose of God is a day when every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. This means one needs to be prepared to give to Jesus an obedience that he will give to no one else. And in doing this, a follower of Christ must think always, not of himself but of others, not of his own glory but of the glory of God.