

Love Divine, all loves excelling

Philippians 2:1-11

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1. Divine love (Philippians 2:5-8)

We have listened to Philippians 2:1-11 read to us, but a word of caution is necessary: we run the risk of thinking about this passage in rather human terms, influenced maybe by the Christmas hymn *"Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown, When Thou camest to earth for me"*; or by a description of Heaven: *"The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass"* (Rev. 21:21).

Wow! we think. Our Lord left Heaven and we imagine Heaven as a glorious palace: the sheer splendor of it, the breathtaking architecture, the exquisite decorations, gold, chandeliers, tapestries, marble floors, and spectacular staircases that seem to defy gravity. If this is possible on earth, then imagine the splendor of Heaven; and we marvel that the Lord left all that to come to this broken and ugly world to save broken and ugly me!!

Well, let's get this straight: these verses in Philippians 2 are not highlighting the splendors of Heaven that the Lord Jesus Christ left behind. Look where the emphasis is placed: *"he emptied himself"* (v. 7). These verses are not saying that heaven was left rather empty because the second person of the Trinity came down to earth; it is saying that "He emptied himself" ... and that makes all the difference when we read these verses of Philippians 2.

Allow me to paraphrase Paul's inspired words of vv. 7 & 8 this way: it tells us that Jesus "emptied himself", he puts aside his rank and dignity, that is, he puts aside the glory that corresponds to him as Creator and takes the condition of the creature, assuming the limitations of the human body. But His journey doesn't end there, for He takes the status of a Servant and finally, in humble obedience, gives his life *"as a ransom for many"* (1 Tim. 2:6). Yes, He left the glories of heaven, but he went far beyond that, he "emptied himself".

Our limited human minds cannot fathom the vast depth of meaning of the words *"He made himself nothing"* (NIV), but at least we can clearly see the result of "making himself nothing": He shows us the maximum expression of Love, unconditional and sacrificial Love.

So the love that concerns us this morning is unconditional & sacrificial Love. If you are still thinking of yesterday's Valentine's Banquet, where attraction played a major part of the love we celebrated, today we are thinking about the love that is unconditional: there was nothing intrinsically attractive in us that motivated Christ's love for us, for we were his enemies, separated from Him by our evil thoughts and actions; dead in our transgressions, yet he loved and loves us.

What are the consequences for us who have received such a depth of love and forgiveness from our precious Saviour? He calls us to show His love to others, especially to those who are the recipients of God's unconditional, sacrificial, complete and unselfish Divine Love.

2. Church love

"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."

(1 Peter 4:8)

Peter writes this verse on Christian brotherly love, the same Peter who had blatantly and publicly denied Christ with a curse, disowning the Good Shepherd. But Jesus doesn't disown him, instead, the resurrected Shepherd entrusts him with a vital job: *"Feed my lambs!"*

So, Peter was so deeply impacted by Christ's love for Him that he repeatedly tells his readers to express the reality of Christ's love by loving each other (1 Pet. 1:22 and 4:8).

A) In this verse Peter emphasizes it by saying *"above all"*:

Peter had already exhorted them *"to live the time we have left doing the will of God"* (4:2) and in doing so *"Above all, keep loving each other..."* He is telling Christ's followers that expressing the reality of Christ's love, by loving each other, is a priority ("above all"), because it is indispensable for living out our brotherly relationships and, therefore, doing the will of God. We are wise enough to know that living out relationships with our brothers and sisters can be a challenging business, because we are all defective ... some of us are more like a hedgehogs than fluffy puppies – who would you rather hug?

Well, love is so much more than an emotion – which is of course part of love. Love is an active business too. We put our love into real activities. How?

B) Well, we are to love *"earnestly"*:

The original word contains the meanings "with intent, constant, strenuous, intense", i.e., taking it to its full potential!! Wow! We are called to express our love to my brothers and sisters in Christ at its full potential! Really? Yes, that's what Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit is saying. But so very often we keep it to the minimum required; we have a "Baloo mentality" (remember him singing about the "bare necessities": *"If you act like that bee acts, uh uh, you're working too hard!"* (*The Jungle Book* - R. Kipling.)

So, how do we know that we are loving at the full potential? What is the objective indicator (if you allow me the expression) that will tell us that we are loving at full potential? Well, we have to turn time and time again to Philippians 2. The Lord Jesus emptied Himself, put aside His own dignity, His

own comfort and gave himself, during His life and until the end. That is the nature of love at its full potential.

Consider this wonderful hymn and read it as a prayer:

“Give me a sight, O Saviour, of Thy wondrous love to me, of the love that brought Thee down to earth, to die on Calvary.

Oh, make me understand it, help me to take it in, what it meant to Thee, the Holy One, to bear away my sin.

Was it the nails, O Saviour that bound Thee to the tree? Nay, 'twas Thine everlasting love, Thy love for me, for me.”

Oh, make me understand it, help me to take it in, what it meant to Thee, the Holy One, to bear away my sin!

May we understand the full extent of Christ unconditional and sacrificial love for us, for then we will be so more able to obey God’s commandment: **“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another”** (1 John 13:34). I believe there is a perfect correlation between our understanding the full extent of “my Saviour’s wondrous love to me” and practicing brotherly love at its full potential.

But careful, as we can fall into the trap of serving sacrificially but with little love, for example, out of mere duty, serving because that’s what I expect of myself, or because others expect it of me. This, without love, is a form of boasting: “I am dependable, I carry out my responsibilities, and I don’t let anyone down.” Let’s remember Philippians 2:3 - **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”**

C) Peter says, **“Love covers a multitude of sins”**, but what does that phrase mean? Is Peter talking about hiding someone’s sin? Is he talking about forgiving sin?

Well, listen to what David the psalmist says on this subject: **“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered”** (Psalm 32:1). David then goes on recounting the awful experience, the spiritual weight of covering up his sin (v. 3) until he decides to confess (v. 5) and the Lord forgave him. So, “covering sin” is not the same as “covering up sin”. “Covering sin” is forgiving sin.

Therefore, loving at its full potential acknowledges and deals with the fact that we are still imperfect: we make mistakes, we are many a time self-centered and we sin. All this will affect our brotherly relationships; so love deals with all this in a very practical manner:

Peter had years earlier asked the Lord how many times he should forgive his brother who sins against him (he is thinking of the sins of others, not his own! - don’t knock him!, just like us!!) We know the Lord’s answer: 70x7, i.e. you can’t put a number on forgiveness, Peter; even if that one brother (or one sister) actually sinned against you 490 times, will you not forgive 491st time? No, Peter, don’t put a number on forgiveness, don’t limit it. Having had your debts forgiven, even though you did not deserve it, you should forgive others with the same generosity with which I have forgiven you.

So Peter has learnt the lesson: **“Love forgives a multitude of sins”**, he says. And how does love deal with the fact that we are not perfect?:

- Love does not turn the imperfections of others into destructive criticisms, which gives rise to conflict. Love, instead, is patient and gracious, overlooking and forgetting them.
- Love does not look at words and actions with suspicion, which breeds misunderstanding and conflict: “what did he mean by that?” “why did she do that?” We are marked by humankind’s original sin (in the Garden of Eden), mistrust (God is not trustworthy – what’s He hiding from us?), and at times we treat brothers and sisters that way too.
- Love recognizes the frailty of our brother and sister, as well as our own, and welcomes them as beloved of God, regardless of the faults and failings we may see within them.
- Love will therefore wisely forgive the offences and affronts of others, not allowing resentment to gain a foothold.

We have two choices then:

- I can cover up sin, by refusing to own up to it and, blinded by this attitude, I set myself as the standard by which I treat my brothers and sisters, or ...
- I acknowledge that Christ covers my sins, faults and errors, and clothed with His love, I make Christ’s love the standard by which I accept, treat and serve my brothers and sisters.

D) Refusing to live out the love of Christ is destructive, but **living the love of Christ at its full potential will breed unity and harmony.** Listen to what Paul says on this matter:

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (Colossians 3:12-14)

When we live a life of deep love for God and for one another it is so much more difficult for sin and resentment to mess up brotherly relationships.

Someone once said, *“Love is the song that believers must all play in order to work together in harmony.”*

3. Love’s testimony

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
(John 13:35)

Please note where this verse is putting the emphasis: not in our own individual actions or behavior (which will indeed point people to Christ) but on the relationship between disciples, for it is here, in the difficulties of relating to each other, where we will show a love which is uncommon, which is nonsensical from a human perspective, because it flies in the face of the world’s priority of satisfying

primarily one's own emotions and desires. Showing divine love in our relationships will make people sit up and take notice.

Summary

The supreme manifestation of God's love is that He gave himself unconditionally for his creatures by taking human form and giving his life for them (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus went to the crux of the matter when He told his disciples: *"Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another"* (John 13:34). This exact standard applies to all of us, we who are the recipients of such deep love and forgiveness from our Lord and Savior. God calls us to exercise unconditional and sacrificial love too, especially to our brothers and sisters (Phil. 2:5), for it will foster individual spiritual growth and will also be an agent of unity in the church (Phil. 2:1-4). Furthermore, it will be a powerful testimony to those around us (John 13:35).