

WWJD: Humility
Philippians 2:3-11
Sunday, January 4, 2026

Paul loved the Philippian church, but he was also worried about them. It seems that at least some within the church were struggling with pride. Instead of being unified in glorifying God and following Jesus, at least some of them were competing to prove to one another how holy they were.

And I guess it's understandable that this was happening. That's how the culture they grew up in worked. It was based on establishing and maintaining a reputation for honor. The whole culture was basically a competition to see who could amass the most honors, the best reputation.

Now, for sure, the people in the church had declared Jesus as their Lord, but old habits die hard, and many of them had carried those habits—that pride—with them into the church.

We see the same sort of thing today, both outside and inside the church. Everyone wants to be the greatest. Everyone wants to be the best. In some people, the pride is pretty easy to spot. They like to brag about how great they are. Others of us are a little more subtle. But it's still there. The Christian author CS Lewis says there's an easy test to see whether you suffer from pride: does it bother you at all when someone else gets attention you think you deserve; when people pay attention to them rather than you. If you're honest, that's a pretty tough test to pass.

But that begs the question. What's really wrong with pride? I mean, our parents bring us up to be proud of our accomplishments. And they're proud of us as well. We want our kids to be proud of who they are, right? We want to be proud of who *we* are.

And the fact is, that kind of pride isn't what the apostle Paul was writing about to the church in Phillipi. Taking satisfaction in a job well done is not a problem. Taking satisfaction in developing your skills and talents to the greatest extent possible is not a problem. It's part of why God put you here: to be all you were created to be.

The problem comes when you begin to focus not so much on being as good as you can be and focus instead on being better than the next guy; when it becomes a competition. The problem comes when I've got to be better than you. The problem comes when I find my meaning and purpose by being better than you, whether it's being a better athlete, being a better student, being more popular, having more money, or having more power.

In other words, this kind of pride is rooted in insecurity. Pride gets ahold of us when we're not secure in our identity. We figure we've got to find our meaning and our value for ourselves, and we typically do so by comparing ourselves to other people.

And because this kind of pride pits me against everyone else, it's fundamentally divisive. When you get right down to it, it's the reason we're living in the "us vs. them" chaos we see going on all around us.

And, so, Christian scholars universally recognize pride as a sin. In fact, among the seven deadly sins of the Catholic church, pride is at the top. Many Christian scholars label pride as not just *a* sin, but as the root of *all* sin.

Which may sound pretty drastic, but think about it. Pride is spiritual poison because when we seek to create our meaning and our identity for ourselves, we substitute ourselves for God.

The Bible is pretty clear that we don't create our own meaning and identity. God does. God created us in God's image, God loves us, and God created us to live in that love. As far as our identity is concerned, that's all that matters.

Of course, the story of Adam and Eve tells us how we messed that up. They figured they were smarter than God and so they ate the fruit. The first act of human pride. And it's just gotten worse since then.

But God didn't give up on us. God loved us so much that God sent Jesus to save us.

And this Jesus that God sent wasn't just some really smart guy with lots of good life lessons. As the apostle Paul says in Colossians 1:15, Jesus is "the image of the invisible God." Or, as Paul says in today's scripture, Jesus is "equal with God." In other words, when we look at Jesus, we're also looking at God, the one in whose image we were created; the one who loved us into existence to live in that love.

In other words, when we look at Jesus's life, we're looking at how we were created to live. And in today's scripture, Paul gives us maybe the best and most beautiful summary of that life in the whole Bible:

"He [Jesus] was in the form of God, but did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, so he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness." In other words, Jesus left eternity and became a human. We've all heard this. We all know this.

But we lack the context to meaningfully process it. I mean, how many of us have lived in a reality where there is no time, but just an eternal now? How many of us have lived in a reality where we aren't constrained by the laws of physics, where we aren't living as isolated beings, but as an inexpressibly joyful part of a divine whole? That's what Jesus left, to enter into the constraints and limitations of time and space. We don't possess the language or even the capability to express what that change must have been like.

And when he came, he took human form. Not to be born as a king, into power and prestige, but born instead to a newlywed couple from an obscure Jewish village.

And as a human, he didn't use his power and his wisdom—his equality with God—to get anything for himself. Instead, he poured himself out in his ministry, going from small village to small village, putting the needs and interests of others before his own in his healing and teaching, and depending entirely on what others were willing to provide him for his living.

And then, having poured himself out in his ministry, he finished by pouring himself out to the point of death. And not just any death, but the most painful and humiliating death possible. The death reserved for the worst of the worst: crucifixion.

We need to remember this. In Jesus, we see the image of the invisible God. He's who God is. The love he lived is the kind of love God is. The love he lived is the love we were created to live. A life lived in such supreme confidence in its identity as a beloved child of God that there is no need to seek validation or meaning anywhere else. A life lived not in competition with others for power, money, and approval. A life lived not in an attempt to claw our way to the top. But a life lived in humility. A life lived in love with God and in love with one another.

And that's what the apostle Paul is telling the church in Phillipi. Live into your identity. Have the same mindset—the same humility—as Jesus. He's telling them that if Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity, God incarnate, refused to lord his superiority over anyone—to the point of allowing himself to be lifted up on a cross—what makes them think they can or should do any differently?

In other words, he's asking them to ask themselves as followers of Jesus, "What would Jesus do?" How would Jesus behave? Would he be a braggart? Would he be arrogant? Would he seek financial, social, or political power in order to dominate others? Or would he love?

And, just to be clear, Paul isn't asking them this question just to help reduce conflict the next time the church carpet has to be replaced, or the next time there's some controversy over Biblical interpretation, or for any other purely practical reason (even though those *are* good and practical reasons to get along). He's asking them to ask themselves what would Jesus do because it will enable them to live into their true identities; it will enable them to live the kind of lives they were created to live; it will enable them to *be* who they were created to be.

And, of course, Paul isn't only asking those Philippians this question. He's also asking us. He's asking everyone who claims to follow Jesus. What would Jesus do? Jesus didn't need to prove anything, and neither do you. Jesus knew who he was. And in asking and answering this question, you can too. You can discover and begin to actually live out your real, God-given identity as a beloved child of God.