Jerome Avery grew up dreaming of being a star track athlete. He was a talented 100M sprinter who ascended the national rankings of this event. And through all his dedication and hard work he truly believed he would become not only an Olympic qualifying athlete but also one who would win a gold medal.

But here’s the truth. Have any of you heard of him? No. We’ve all heard of someone named Usain Bolt who competed during that same time period.

In 2000 Jerome Avery would finish a very respectable top 20 at the US Olympic Trials. And again in 2004, he would finish in the top 15. While you and I would probably never feel like a failure if we finished in the top 15 fastest people in the US, Avery was crushed as he felt his dream had been dashed to pieces.

But because of this failure, Avery was forced to reevaluate his life goals. He soon had a friend reach out to him to recruit him to be a guide runner for Paralympic athletes. A guide runner is someone who would train with and compete with an athlete who is blind. These runners run shoulder to shoulder tethered together by a short rope with handles on each end for them to hold.



Avery has been paired with a few different blind athletes since shifting to guide running in 2004. And he’s had success in doing so. He has competed in World Championships and the Paralympic Games where he has helped his athlete receive both silver and gold medals.

In speaking of watching Avery and his current partner, David Brown, one writer has said, “To watch them run is to watch athletic poetry in motion.” It is a beautiful thing to behold.

**TITLE SLIDE:**

**The Tethered Community: How Jesus Transforms Through Humility**

The reason you may find Jerome Avery’s story incredible is not likely their achievements but because of his attitude. He shifted his attitude, training, and even his life goals toward the success of another individual instead of his own. It’s beautiful to imagine how he uncoupled himself from achieving his own success so that he would be literally tethered to the success of another person.

This is the kind of beautiful story that I would have expected the Apostle Paul to envision happening in the church of Philippi. And as we come to Philippians 2 today I hope that we take up this kind of attitude as we also have our theological imaginations filled with both how Christ has done this for us and how we can do this for one another.

So let’s read at Philippians 2:1-11 now. If you need a bible there are some available in the back corner. The words will also be on the screen as I read them aloud.

**Philippians 2:1-11**

**1 If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 3Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. 4Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.**

**5 Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,**

**6 who, existing in the form of God,**

**did not consider equality with God**

**as something to be exploited.**

**7 Instead he emptied himself**

**by assuming the form of a servant,**

**taking on the likeness of humanity.**

**And when he had come as a man,**

**8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient**

**to the point of death—**

**even to death on a cross.**

**9 For this reason God highly exalted him**

**and gave him the name**

**that is above every name,**

**10 so that at the name of Jesus**

**every knee will bow—**

**in heaven and on earth**

**and under the earth—**

**11 and every tongue will confess**

**that Jesus Christ is Lord,**

**to the glory of God the Father.**

This is God’s word.

This morning I want to show you 3 things we need if we are to be the persons and church of a humble, Christ-tethered community. First,

1. **We need humble attitudes… just like Jesus.**

Paul begins this section of his letter with a conditional statement. IF \_\_\_\_, then \_\_\_. If you understand Jesus’ love, then you will love each other in the same way. You’ll be humble like Jesus. You’ll have the same attitude Jesus has.

Now I know this may feel or sound very passive aggressive or like a Jesus juke. Remember Paul’s goal here is increasing joy not behavior modification. Notice Paul sets up obedience in taking on Christ’s attitude (v. 5) AFTER he helps us remember Christ’s actions (v.1) and how they should shape us.

So what was Christ’s attitude? Humble. Jesus is so humble that he carries himself in an unhurried, relaxed, non-anxious, and joyful manner. He is others-focused in the ways that Paul is asking us to be others focused- reject prideful selfish ambition and consider others more important than yourselves **(Phil 2:3)**

Wow, that’s a tall task. Let me be go ahead and state the obvious: we all fail at this. And it just goes to show why we all need Jesus in the first place. We want to be our own saviors but we can’t. Our default mode is pride.

Paul’s command here in verse 5 to take on the attitude of Jesus is made explicit just before in verse 3 where he says: **but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves.** **(Phil. 2:3b)**

Humility is a tricky thing. If you claim you have it, then you just made clear that you don’t. It’s like looking at the color of a star. To see the color of a star with just your eyes you have to look just off to the side of the star itself, not directly at it. What does that mean? Humility is not achieved by focusing on it directly. It says look over there, tell me more about you, and how can I help you.

That’s why you can never ask a humble person what makes them so humble. If they answer, they’re kind of disqualifying themselves. It is a very shy virtue.

So Paul paints the picture of humility by setting our minds onto Jesus and onto others. Humility, by default, is others oriented for their good.

Paul doesn’t list a series of commands to obey in order to evaluate our progress. He paints a picture of an attitude that is always open to meeting the needs of others. Humble attitudes never stop to congratulate themselves because a list is finished. Humble people do stop and celebrate though because they see the success of those they’ve helped.

And are there needs and interests of others? Absolutely. This isn’t setting you or I up to be a doormat or people-pleaser either. Remember, Jesus said, **“No one takes my life from me but I lay it down on my own.” (John 10:18)**.

This is why when I think of the humble leaders in our church, I am so grateful.

* CityKids Vol’s- teaching and caring for kids who are not their own
* Clean Team- cleaning up the literal messes in our church that they didn’t make
* Meal Train warriors- taking meals to families who have a new baby or to someone ill or grieving in our church
* And in general people who simply serve without seeking to be heard, seeking to criticize, or seeking glory for themselves

That’s why it resembles being a guide runner like Jerome Avery. The race stops being about you. Humility puts an end to my pursuit for the podium so I can find a way to put someone else up there. Humility is bowing down like a runner at the starting line while also grasping the end of a tether to guide their partner to the finish line.

So how do we grow in humble service toward one another? That brings me to my second point:

**2. We need lyrics and rhythm… not just lists and rules.**

In reading about Jerome Avery and his now long-time running partner, David Brown, he describes their process. So just how does someone actually succeed as a guide runner. Yes, you have to be fast. Both of them are. But there’s more to it.

Remember, Avery’s partner cannot see and they run an all-out event in a kind of modified three-legged race. In order to tether yourself together to run in a straight line at top speed it requires more than just knowledge of how to run fast in the right direction. It involves cadence and rhythm. Here’s what one author has attributed to their success.

**“Both self-described music nuts, Brown and Avery rely on rhythm to help synchronize their pace and the language of music to change things at a rapid clip on the track. Avery will warm up with anything ranging from jazz to hip hop to rhythm and blues to get the two of them singing and moving rhythmically together, then use similar beats vocally when they’re on the track together. “It’s a great way to form a bond, get us synchronized,” Avery said.[[1]](#footnote-0)**

So we shouldn’t be surprised that Paul shares Jesus’ gospel story. This is the rhythm and cadence we need to pace our lives with. We need to get in sync with our savior.

Verses 6-11 are believed to be the oldest, perhaps the first, Christian hymn. You can tell it is set in a more lyrical style like poetry. The language changes. And the subject of this song is all about Jesus.

Paul conforms our humble aspirations with a song about Jesus’ humble gospel story. And to enter into it we need to participate in all three parts of the song:

**Incarnation**

**Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,**

**Phil. 2:5-7a**

**6 who, existing in the form of God,**

**did not consider equality with God**

**as something to be exploited.**

**7 Instead he emptied himself**

**by assuming the form of a servant,**

**taking on the likeness of humanity.**

Christ stepped into humanity. He emptied himself of the glory of divinity in order to fully participate in our humanity.

This is step one to understanding humility. You can’t experience the kind of joy that comes from humility by remaining puffed up about yourself or keeping others at arms length. We have to be emptied and we must come into proximity with others.

Jesus not only became human. He became a kind of human that was lower than others: a servant. He bowed himself, empty of all selfish ambition, and bound himself as a servant to meet the greatest needs of all of humanity.

Christ’s incarnation is our entry point into the humble story. Perhaps you and I need to allow God to open our eyes to where we must enter in and how we need to be emptied of all our glory seeking.

**Crucifixion**

Next Paul reminds us of Christ’s obedience all the way to the cross.

**Phil. 2:7b-8**

**And when he had come as a man,**

**8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient**

**to the point of death—**

**even to death on a cross.**

Christ didn’t just meet our felt needs, he met our greatest spiritual needs. He took on our sin and shame and bore them both naked on a cross. He absorbed God’s wrath so that we would no longer be separated from God.

For Jesus to receive the crown of glory he had to go through the cross of shame.

And this is where the song of humility becomes most difficult but also most beautiful. To get to the crown we must go through the cross. Humble attitudes must be filled with a kind of deep joy like Jesus had to see past the cross like Jesus did.

**Hebrews 12:2**

**keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

When we want to look away and turn away in our selfish pride, we must remember the refrain of the cross. The beauty of the humble life comes from being joyfully crushed for the joy of others.

Fortunately, Paul’s song concludes with Christ’s...

**Exaltation**

Jesus’ descent went from heaven to human, human to servant, and servant to criminal. But alas he was exalted as risen and reigning. Just as Christ rose physically from the dead, he also is seated above all thrones and powers. Beautiful way. His name is above every name. There is only room for Jesus on the podium.

Imagine us as a community both singing and moving rhythmically together in cadence with this Jesus story and song. Imagine us never seeking our own ways but always wanting to exalt the risen Jesus through our humble service of one another and our city.

So what’s the last thing we need to be this kind of community?

**3. We need to grasp the tether.**

The most amazing thing to me about Jerome Avery and David Brown’s success together is not that David Brown has become the world’s fastest blind sprinter of all time. Indeed he’s one of the fastest men of all time, period. It’s not even how Avery was instrumental to his success and gold medals.

I’m astounded by Avery’s attitude. He has said flat out: I’m here for him. If he wins, I win. He’s Batman, and I’m Robin. Avery calls it success through selflessness. And he’s not just downplaying his role. He is genuinely committed to Brown’s success. Though they are a team, it is all about Brown receiving all the glory.

After a couple of years of training together, the duo went on to smash the world record on their way to a gold medal in the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games 100M event. Avery recalls the moment afterward seeing Brown on the podium to receive his gold medal: Draped with the flag, smiling ear to ear, and hearing the anthem playing over the stadium loudspeakers.

Let me read the last couple of verses again in this passage:

**Philippians 2:10-11**

**10 so that at the name of Jesus**

**every knee will bow—**

**in heaven and on earth**

**and under the earth—**

**11 and every tongue will confess**

**that Jesus Christ is Lord,**

**to the glory of God the Father.**

This is the summary response of a humbled life. The way up is the way down. Bowed posture and the confession of not only our lips but also our lives.

Jesus has to be the subject of the song of our life. His story must be the story we are living in. Our voices lift up his name above every name. And we let go of all the tethers of our self-glorifying success- my kids, my money, my career, my time, my ministry. And we grab on to the tether of righteousness that Christ holds out to us.

Yes, Jesus is the only one deserving of the podium but he allows us to join him there. Can you believe that?

Listen, you can’t just muster up enough self-will to get do this. You must take the descending journey just as Christ did. Empty of all selfish ambition and conceit. And you must receive the righteousness that only Christ is qualified to give. Jesus is highly exalted and standing on the podium. Perhaps today for some of you he is inviting you to tether yourself to him. You only need to grab the other end of the rope in faith. Be emptied of your pride and pursuit of being your own savior. Be cleaned, be washed, and join Christ in his glorious story.

And for those of us who are already tethered to Jesus, then what about our connection and commitment to one another? Are you living in a way always tugging away to chase your selfish endeavors? Maybe it is time to let go of chasing after the wind so that we can make our way forward together. Imagine it being said of us as a church family as it has been said of Avery and Brown, “To watch them run together is like watching poetry in motion.”

And as Paul said, **Make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. (Phil 2:2)**

City Church let’s be this kind of tethered community, draped with the righteousness of Jesus and having his anthem of glory playing over us as we grin ear to ear.

LORD’s SUPPER

1. <https://www.runnersworld.com/training/a32906014/blind-runner-david-brown-jerome-avery-paralympics-training/> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)