

Philippians 2:1-14: *Kenosis*

1. We can't empty ourselves if we value and fear what the world does. Discuss the chart which compares the response of the ancient Greek and modern Western responses to common fears with the gospel response.
2. Many years ago, when I was in graduate school, a friend of mine sat in the physics building, in the middle of the night, alone. He was discouraged by his studies and the challenges of graduate school, enough so that he was thinking seriously of dropping out. Then walked in a stranger, who told him that God had sent him to tell him to keep going, not to give up. He did and has had a remarkably successful career as a biophysicist.

This exemplifies one of the two main ways God leads his people: God tells Ananias to go to Judas' house on Straight Street in Damascus and ask for Saul. God tells Cornelius to fetch Peter. God leads Israel with a pillar of flame and smoke. Call this Method #1. We could list many modern examples of Method #1.

In Method #2, God changes the way we think so that we aren't dependent on direct instructions. As Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." In this passage Jesus is telling us how to tap into this mode of communication.

What roles does each of these play in the life of the Christian? Do you crave one or the other? Why?

3. Despite Paul's many examples and antitheses, kenosis can be hard to wrap our brains around. Jesus tells us to take up our crosses, and to lose our lives. Are we doing that? What should we be doing differently? **Things which make kenosis hard** to nail down include:
 - a. It looks like passivity or even cowardice;
 - b. it's genuinely tricky to know where to surrender and where to hold fast (should you we give in on worship style? How did Paul know when to shrug in the face of opposition as in 1:18 or open up a can of righteous whoop-*ss as in Galatians);
 - c. it requires both spontaneity, when surprised by an opportunity to surrender, and also planning—you can't give of your time if you don't have any time to give;
 - d. it can appear to run counter to our responsibilities; you can't give away all your money if you also have to support your family.

Things which make kenosis easier to grasp include:

- a. a renewed awareness of what God has done for us, for our riches in Christ;
- b. picking a *goal*; it's hard to get excited about the abstract concept, but can be exhilarating once you have a particular goal, whether it's building a learning center in Haiti or bringing light to the inner city or bringing the Bible alive for little kids;
- c. it is multi-level and personal—what works for your neighbor might not be what gets you fired up about self-sacrifice, and it's both about holding doors open for others *and* about choices of career and money;

- d. it starts with a surrendering of pride¹—when we no longer are worried about what others think it’s MUCH easier to put up with being maligned unfairly by others in the church;
- e. focusing on a concrete example, a story or account which Keller describes as being “radioactive” for you—as the climax of *Tale of Two Cities*, where Sydney Carton comforts the young seamstress and his willingness to die for Darnay gives her courage to accept her own impending execution.

What about kenosis trips you up? What, on the other hand, gets you fired up about picking up your cross?

- 4. In v. 12-13, Paul exhorts the Philippians to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” Given the context of the Philippians, what does Paul refer to with the phrase “to will and to act”? Assuming continuity with the preceding passage, what does it mean to “work out your salvation”?
- 5. The paradigmatic nature of this passage, and the parallel structure running throughout, both *require* that if we imitate Jesus in his suffering we will experience a glorification the like of which this world has never known. What does that mean for believers in this life and the next? (See 3:10, 21; 2 Cor 3:16-18; 4:16-18.)

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Fun fact: Greek philosopher Celsus, in the 2nd century, argued: “God is good, beautiful, happy and in the highest degree of beauty and excellence. Therefore, if he comes down to people, he must submit to change, and change from good to bad, from beauty to ugliness, from happiness to misfortune, and from what is most excellent to what is most evil. Who would choose such a change?” Our passage answers his objection (as did Origen); amazingly, is it possible to be human and retain the divine nature. (John Granger Cook, *Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism*, 64.)

¹ Contrast 2:3’s “empty conceit”, *kenodoxia*, with 2:7’s “emptied himself”, *kenoō*.

Leader's Intro:

Okay, this is THE incredibly rich center of Philippians. Paul is, as he likes to do, employing thesis/antithesis by comparing Jesus' attitude and actions with those of the Roman Christians who are giving Paul trouble, as well as the "opponents" of the Philippians (which we learned last time could include the Romans who would be persecuting the Philippians for not bending the knee to the imperial cult, and/or Judaizers who would be pressuring the Gentile converts among the Philippians to undergo circumcision).

Last time we talked about Paul's advice to them for withstanding these pressures: The solution, he says, is to close ranks and have the same mindset, which he says is one of other-centeredness. This is of course tied inextricably to both "to live is Christ, to die is gain" and "I have found the secret of being content in any and all circumstances." The early church in Rome faced troubles no less than ours, and Paul says the center holds if knit together with self-sacrificial love. THAT is the way, the way of Christ, the only way. Your fears are satisfied in this and this alone.

It's worth noting that this also bears on Paul's earlier blessing, which culminated in this phrase: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ..." (1:9-10). This is a curious prayer. On the one hand it says greater understanding and discernment comes through the process of love; i.e. you learn to think the way Christ did by acting like Christ acted. On the other hand, it implies that Paul expects they are going to face a decision point, whether that means discerning how to resist the authorities, or how to respond to the Judaizers, or even just how to carry on after Paul's death, which may be imminent.

The latter point is also worthy of note. Death stalks both Paul and the Philippians. Paul knows he might be executed, presumably for treason. Epaphroditus nearly died bringing Paul assistance. The Philippians likely face a persecution like that in Pliny's letter to emperor Trajan:

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.

Chilling.

In terms of background, note the following:

- 2:5-11 is famous as a hymn, but that's not at all well established. It is clearly poetry. But it would be a strange hymn, given the language of theological argumentation in v. 9, "therefore..."
- There are powerful resonances between this passage and the servant song in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, especially 52:13, "See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted" and 53:12, "Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death..." See also 45:18-24 about his glorification.
- Jesus, in emptying himself, set aside his omniscience (Mt 24:36); his omnipotence (Mk 6:5); his omnipresence (Jn 11:6); his righteousness-by-nature (Heb 4:15—he was tempted—and also James 1:13—God cannot be tempted—Heb 5:8—he "learned obedience"). Jesus walked on water, healed the sick and raised the dead, but so did Peter. Explains why in John 8:28, 14:28, 5:19, 30, Jesus presents himself as less than and dependent on the Father. All this because he needed to become completely like us to be a "merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb 2:17-18).
- Note also the parallels in:

- 2 Peter 1:3-4: **“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”**
- Lk 9:23-24: If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but **whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.**
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Another note, elaborated on below: God has different modes of leading us. One is the “direct” method, where God gives revelation we would otherwise not have access to, as when God directs Cornelius to visit Peter. The “organic” method is for God to change the very way we think. We often look longingly at the former; we wish God would direct us, would speak to us audibly, would give us the answers, would part the clouds and relieve the lonely silence we feel in our lives. But this passage gets at something crucial: God wants us to actually understand *why* Jesus did what he did, and to *think* like him. In Scripture the mark of Christian maturity is discernment of right and wrong; God wants that for us.

Keller preaches a nice sermon in which he focuses on the contrast between Jesus’ kenosis, emptying, and the “vain conceit” of 2:3, which is “kenodoxa”—same root, meaning literally something like “empty glory”. The thing which brings disunity and stands in the way of real kenosis is our pride, our desire for recognition.

Extra questions and observations:

1. The powerfully rich poem of 2:5-11 describes the paradigm of Jesus' *kenosis*, his emptying of himself in "becoming nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (2:7). This is a paradigm; Paul is giving Jesus' example not foremost to establish the theology of the incarnation, but because he knows more than anything else the Philippians need to follow Jesus' example if they are to survive as a community and, in some cases, as individuals.

The focus, then, is what Jesus does. It establishes the paradigm which Paul has been repeating, that they should "live lives worth of the gospel" (1:27); "standing firm in one spirit", "suffering for him" (1:29); "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit"; "value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Been thinking lately about this show I watch which my sister Amy recommended, *Person of Interest*. It's the one where a computer program analyzes databases and CCTV feeds from all around the country and predicts where violence will happen, so that the good guys can go prevent it. The intel comes in the form of a soc. sec. #. The agents then get to investigate and decide whether the person is at risk of being a victim or perpetrator, and how to prevent it.

As the show develops the program starts to interact at a more personal level with one agent--will give very explicit info on how to proceed--like go to this address, get this person to do such-and-such, you will find in this place something you need for your mission, etc. This agent finds the connection exhilarating. But she's being treated like a tool, not a collaborator. She isn't told why to do these things, just what to do, in great detail.

It made me think of the two ways God works with people in Scripture. Method #1 is like hers: God tells Ananias to go to Judas' house on Straight Street in Damascus and ask for Saul. God tells Cornelius to fetch Peter. God leads Israel with a pillar of flame and smoke. God sends someone to meet with Ed Hull in a classroom at the U of R in the middle of the night so that he won't give up.

But then there's method #2: God changes the way we think so that we aren't dependent on a constant stream of instructions. As Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." And of course I am thinking of this because of Philippians 2, where we are told to have the same "mindset" as Jesus, and we are even told what he was thinking--that he didn't consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage.

Method #1 is truly exhilarating to those who experience it, from all accounts. And many will think it represents a high level of spirituality, believer as perfect antenna for the will of God. But Method #2 is far deeper. It's like what Craig Keener says about the gift of prophecy: If you want to be used in this way, learn to think the way God thinks. That's what God has in mind for us.