

"Made Himself nothing" — literally "emptied Himself", not by giving up His deity but rather laying aside the glory of it, and submitting to the humiliation of becoming man. While remaining completely God, He became completely human.

• **For further study**, see John 17:5; 2 Cor. 8:9.

Nature of a servant, Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Born as a human, John 1:14, 1 Tim. 3:16.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!

"Obedient to death... on a cross" or "the death of the cross" (NKJ), reserved for the worst criminals. It was God's will (see the scope of the references) that Jesus should die for the sins of humanity.

• **For further study**, see Isaiah 53:7; Matt. 26:39; John 3:16; 10:17–18; Rom. 5:8, 19; 8:3; Heb. 5:8; 1 John 4:9–10, 14.

9-11 Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the

SUMMARY Paul being absent from them, is reminding them to guard their unity through Christ-like attitudes — not exalting themselves (He did the exact opposite), and demonstrating their new life by a willingness to serve and defer to others.

APPLICATION Church politics and disagreements rob the church of its spiritual power and witness. The desire to control is the thread that runs through all politics and when we forget our shared identity in Christ and experience of His gift of salvation, it sours the fellowship. Don't let that happen, Paul is saying, urging his readers to be mindful of how Christ, fully God, humbled Himself to become man and suffer the vilest degradation, for us to share His new life. By loving each other we show ourselves to be genuinely His.

QUESTION *Is it sometimes OK to disagree in church? If so, how should it be done, in the light of this teaching?*

PRAYER Lord, we acknowledge that we are sometimes more carnal than spiritual. Help us to be mindful of who we are in you, granted salvation and new life through the greatest example of humble obedience ever.

You have called us to Your way of righteousness and shown us what it is like. Help us to defer to one another, listen to the voice of Your Spirit, be willing to be led by Him — and above all, to love and esteem others above ourselves. May this be for Your kingdom and Your glory. Amen.

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name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

"Therefore" — the ultimate degradation of such a tortured death is linked to the degree of exaltation.

12-13 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed — not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence — 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.

"Work out your salvation" — salvation is a free gift and cannot be earned by works, Acts 2:38–40, Ephesians 2:8–9. "Work out", *katergazomai*, was used by a first-century Greek author of digging out silver from a mine — so the Philippians are to reveal and develop the Christ-like experience of their salvation. In the context from earlier, it means their relationships and unity.

The Living Word

Bible readings for Sunday, September 27, 2020, with explanatory notes

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Bible study on the Revised Common Lectionary passages for **September 27**

Prepare by reading the Bible passages beforehand — read again to reflect on the pulpit teaching

Theme: **The dangers of disabling disagreements**

Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32 — Exiles blame God for challenging their sin

Matthew 21:23–32 — The religious authorities rebuff Jesus' question

Philippians 2:1–13 — Like-minded love is fellowship that stays united

And also: Psalm 25:1–9

Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32 — Exiles blame God for challenging their sin

The challenge is to agree with God's fair perspective — and turn around

1-2 The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: "'The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?"

"The parents eat sour grapes" — a proverb used by the exiles to put the blame for their misdeeds on their ancestors. See Jeremiah 31:28–30.

3-4 "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For everyone belongs to Me, the parent as well as the child — both alike belong to Me. The one who sins is the one who will die.

"The one who sins" — the present people of Judah were sinful and idolatrous and needed to face up to their own guilt, not blame their forefathers for it. Ezekiel's word brings the corrective from Deuteronomy 24:16.

25 "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, you Israelites: Is My way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?"

"Is it not your ways" — Israel had not learned in exile and changed its ways. They persisted in doing wrong, while blaming God for being unfair to them.

26-28 "If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin, they will die for it; because of the sin they have committed they will die. But if a wicked person turns away from the wickedness they have committed and

does what is just and right, they will save their life. Because they consider all the offences they have committed and turn away from them, that person will surely live; they will not die.

"If a righteous person... a wicked person... turns" — choosing to live right is an individual responsibility.

29 "Yet the Israelites say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are My ways unjust, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?"

"The way of the Lord is not just" — the people, like children, were claiming "It's not fair!" God doesn't live up to our idea of fairness; we live up to His.

30-32 "Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offences; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offences you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!"

"Repent and live" — echoing Moses' words when he put a bronze serpent on a pole, to get people to look to God with faith.

"Get a new heart and a new spirit" — later in Ezekiel this is promised, but here they are commanded to turn and get a new attitude before God. See Ezekiel 36:26–27.

SUMMARY The exiled Jews are returning to Judah, but it's evident that they haven't learned the lessons of their 'breaking experience' of being exiled and seeing Jerusalem overrun. Argumentative with each other and with God (and with those called to speak for Him in a prophetic role), they are attributing their wayward behaviour to God having let His people be taken away in exile.

APPLICATION God's word, through Ezekiel, was for these people to take responsibility for their own lives and not pass the blame on to others. If God is restoring us in one way, and we are asserting that circumstances have made us different, that is a disagreement – as if we know best!

QUESTION *Have you sometimes wanted to say, "That's just the way I was made"? Why does God have another perspective?*

Matthew 21:23-32 – Temple authorities rebuff Jesus' question

His story showed that recognising sin and changing was the way into the kingdom

23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while He was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him. "By what authority are You doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave You this authority?"

"Chief priests and elders" — the temple officials and the family heads of each tribe who, with the scribes, made up the Sanhedrin.

"By what authority" — this was following a demonstration, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, with all the messianic overtones. The question revealed the Sanhedrin's spiritual blindness and implacable opposition to Jesus.

24-25 Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?"

They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe Him?'"

26 "But if we say, 'Of human origin' – we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet."

"I will also ask" — in the way of rabbis, Jesus counters the question with another question, linking His teaching to John the Baptist, who was widely revered by the people.

27 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."

Then He said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

"We don't know" — not answering is dishonest, but also ignorant. If they cannot say whether John was sent by God, how can they judge whether Jesus is?

28 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

"A man who had two sons" — like a miniature of the story of the lost son, Luke 15:11-32.

29 "'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

"Later he changed his mind" — this first son then did what his father wanted (v.31 below)

30 "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

31 "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

"Entering the kingdom... ahead of you" — the outcasts of society, like the first son, had rejected "the way of righteousness", v.32 below; however, they were the ones who later received the Good News of Jesus and His kingdom.

32 "For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after

you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

"The way of righteousness" — doing what is right by God, including believing Jesus' teaching on how one enters the kingdom of God, John 3:5-7, 16-18.

SUMMARY The nature of the disagreement in this passage is between the members of the ruling council and the temple authorities; and Jesus with His message of the kingdom of God and the diverse and sometimes colourful characters who were responding to it and finding their lives changed. The religious leaders were convinced that they were the ones to whom the kingdom of God belonged. Jesus' story about the two sons was a picture of the opposing attitudes. One son was like the religious person who professes obedience but does something else. The other son was choosing not to obey (like disreputable members of society) but then had a change of heart and came through in the end, with what his father wanted.

APPLICATION We are better at talking the talk, than walking the walk. It is clear from the story that Jesus is not interested in a kind of institutional righteousness, nor in professions we make without substance. However, He is waiting to help anyone who turns from their own selfish course and looks to Him – at any time.

QUESTION *The chilling conundrum in this story is whether we have assumed, through the right forms of respectability and belonging, that the kingdom of God is our entitlement. Are we prepared to line up with some very ordinary people, and thank God for His gracious gift in Jesus?*

Philippians 2:1-13 – Like-minded love is fellowship that stays united

Christ-like humility guards against against damaging ambition and personal agendas

1-2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

"If you have" — written in the sense of "I know you have": Paul was sure that the Philippians were rich in the qualities that follow, but wanted to emphasise the overriding importance of growing in love for one another.

"Like-minded" — not uniformity but being collaborative. The Holy Spirit brings unity, drawing on diversity.

3-4 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

"Even after you saw this, you did not repent" — the temple authorities (v.23) saw the change in others, but could not believe. "Entering... ahead of you", v.31 above, leaves the way open for them to come in.

"Selfish ambition... vain conceit" — self-promotion and self-importance are twins that murder unity, harmony and ultimately, the gospel. Selfish ambition is listed as a harmful 'act of the flesh' in Galatians 5:19-21.

"Value others above yourselves" — a fair definition of the unique quality of Christian love. Christians, loved by God and belonging to Him, are free from the need for status and affirmation and able to show preference to others.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

"The same mindset" — as Jesus, who preferred others by dying for us. Christians growing in Christ, will by definition be growing in Christ's unique loving humility.

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

"In very nature God" — fully God in essential form and being, not just appearance.

7 ...rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.