When Paul says that Jesus ‘emptied himself,’ people sometimes think this means that Jesus was divine up to that point, but stopped being divine when he became human, and then went back to being divine again after the resurrection. This is not at all what Paul means. Paul clearly states that Jesus was equal with God and that Jesus existed as God long before creation and long before he decided to become human (v. 7). Jesus’ decision to become human, and to be obedient all the way to the cross, was not a decision to stop being divine; rather, it was a decision about *what it* *really* *means to be divine*.

Reflecting on this, N. T. Wright writes: “Jesus retained his equality with God; the point of the cross, for Paul, is that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor. 5:19) ... Jesus didn’t regard this equality as something to take advantage of or something to exploit. Rather, the eternal son of God, the one who became human in and as Jesus of Nazareth, regarded his equality with God as committing him to the course he took: of becoming human, of becoming Israel’s anointed representative, of dying under the weight of the world’s evil. This is what it meant to be equal with God. As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love.”

Jesus regarded our lowly, fallen, sinful situation and choose to look to our redemption, even at the cost of his own life. Jesus divested himself of the need to be only God to also be a human. Jesus divested the need to be Lord of all to become Servant of all. Jesus divested his exalted rank to assume a humble one and divested his eternality as God to submit to death as a mortal (vv. 5-8). The eternal Christ divested himself of just about everything that identified him as the God who was present at creation, in whom all things held together, to come down to earth and into the mess of the human experience.

Jesus humbled himself in the way that a billionaire who made her money in tech apps might be humbled if she lost all her money and became a box handler at an Amazon fulfillment center. Yet Jesus’ transition from glory to gore was even more profound. A billionaire who becomes a box handler is still a human after this shocking tumble down the economic ladder. Her new condition is just a difference in rank, social standing, or access to ready cash. When the eternal Christ became a human, this involved a massive morphologicalchange. Christ became someone he had never been before and would henceforth never cease to be. There was no going back. God morphed into a human known as Jesus yet retaining his divinity. This was an unprecedented union of the divine and human.

Paul emphasizes that Jesus is found “in human likeness…in human form” (v. 7). Jesus did not use his superpowers or his divine “otherness” to elevate himself above others. He was fully human. Jesus stepped into our humanness. He occupied a body. He felt human pain. He experienced temptation. He knew disappointment and sorrow. He cried real tears when his friends died, or when others turned away. Jesus empathized; he had compassion for others.

This is the example Jesus sets for our interaction with others: to remember our common humanity. Before starting a fight with a neighbor, we will remember that we do not walk in their shoes. Before being judgmental, we will give others the benefit of the doubt. Before doing something hurtful, we will perform an act of kindness. Before jumping to front of the line, we will invite others to go first. When we regard each other in our humanness and look for ways to put the interests of others ahead of our own. This is the Jesus way. Jesus’ self-emptying teaches us that we are all humans, children of God, bearing the image of God.

Paul goes on to say that Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave…” (v. 7). The word “slave” makes us uncomfortable; it conjures up horrible images from our nation’s history of Blacks suffering ill-treatment by Whites. But in Greek, there are two words for slave. The first is as we know it: one who performs physical labor and is demeaned as the property of another person, a person without rights. But the second word, *doulos*, the word Paul uses, carries the connotation of one who is part of the family in everything but name. A household slave, like a tutor or a nanny, seeks the well-being of their charges. They devote their lives to the service of master’s children and are accorded marks of respect within the family they serve. “Servants focus on others, not themselves,” says pastor Rick Warren paraphrasing C. S. Lewis. “This is true humility: not thinking less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less.”

In this respect, being a “slave” means devoting oneself to the service of others. We are compelled to render such service because Jesus identifies this as his and our primary mission: “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). In Jesus’ case, it was the literal truth: his service cost him his life. As Paul writes, Jesus “being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (v. 8).

Jesus emptied himself for our sake. Jesus divested himself of his divine nature, dying to achieve our salvation. Jesus humbled himself in the eyes of the world to accomplish God’s purpose of regaining the world. The people of Jesus’ day did not consider humility a virtue. In Greek and Latin, the word “humility” means something like “crushed” or “debased.” Humility was embarrassing, to show weakness or vulnerability was shameful. It was more humiliation than honor. Yet, Jesus willingly emptied himself and accepted the debasement of a humiliating death for our sake, because he knew it was the only way to achieve the salvation God knew we needed.

On Palm Sunday, we remember how Jesus rode into Jerusalem, acclaimed by the crowds as the promised Messiah who would free them from oppression. We remember, too, how quickly the crowd turned on Jesus, completely misinterpreting and condemning him for his mission of service. Paul reminds us, however, that a life devoted to serving others is pleasing to God. Jesus emptied himself, humbled himself, and so will be exalted by God for his service.

Jesus himself urged his disciples to be servant leaders: “The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” (Luke 22:26). In today’s reading, Paul reminds Euodia and Syntyche and the rest of the Philippian Christians of the same thing. Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross” (v. 8).

This is Jesus’ way. His self-emptying teaches us that we all are one in our humanity. We are called to be servants. We must not be afraid to suffer when that suffering serves a greater good. Following this template and divesting ourselves of self-interest, we will be able to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

Prayer: Holy God, you have fed us all out of your own generous and gracious hands. From them, we have received welcome, nourishment, hope, and consolation. May these things grow in us, alongside the gift of faith, so that we may plant their seeds in the world around us. Through the Holy Spirit, guide us in the days ahead to re-member our place in your great and on-going story of resurrection, redemption, and restoration through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Sources:**

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**The Great Divestiture**

Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022 [Philippians 2:5-11](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+2%3a5-11&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The apostle Paul was a prolific letter writer. We have thirteen of Paul’s letters in the New Testament, written to congregations in Rome, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Galatia, and Colossae, to name a few. Some of Paul’s letters encourage these new Christians to hold fast to the faith. Some letters are filled with advice that sounds a little like scolding, specifically Paul’s letters to the bickering Christians at Corinth. But Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi is a touching, heartfelt message to a church the apostle remembers fondly. Paul loved the Christians at Philippi, but that did not mean Paul would let them off the hook if they strayed.

There is one small, niggling concern that Paul raises in his letter to the Philippians. Paul senses an undercurrent of dissension within the congregation. Two influential women in the church, Euodia and Syntyche, women who labored beside Paul “in the work of the gospel,” were not “of the same mind” (4:2-3). Imagine that: two Christians with differing points of view! Paul addresses this disunity in verses 3-4, where uses two imperatives: *regard* and *look*. Regard others as better than yourselves and look to the interests of others before your own. Paul cites Jesus Christ himself as the premier example of this selfless behavior.

This text is a great lead-in to Holy Week which culminates in the awful, state-sponsored murder of Jesus, the one person who offered humanity its only chance of redemption. We have the luxury of knowing how this story ends, however. After the horror of the crucifixion there is a reversal of fortunes, and the victim emerges victorious. Jesus is exalted, invested with a new name, knees are bowing, and all of creation is confessing that “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father” (v. 11). Great news! Hallelujah! Christ be praised!

But the exaltation of Jesus is not Paul’s point at all. Paul writes of the self-emptying of Christ to *provide an* *example that informs Christian behavior!* Today’s reading is the great “self-emptying,” the great divestiture passage of Philippians and indeed the New Testament. This idea is derived from the language in verses 5 and 6: “[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptiedhimself…”