

Series: If You Wanna Go Up... You Gotta Go Down

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 13, 2020
DESCENDING INTO GREATNESS
Philippians 2:1-11
SPEAKER: KEN DAVIS

1. In our culture, **UP** is a good word. People who watch polls and stock markets like **UP**. People want their salaries to go...**UP!** When people are in a good mood they're...**up**. When people have too much money and too many manners and too much silverware at the table we call them... **upper** class. Students like it when their GPA goes...**UP!**

-If up is good, down is bad. Down and out, down scale, downhill, down-hearted—**goose down** is good for us—but bad for geese! When people are sick, we say they are **down** with the flu. A **put down** is an insult. When people die, they don't **want** to go down, they want to go **up**. The only time **down** is good is when it's hooked to prices. **Touch-downs** are good too—if you're into football.

- a. We have a name for people who are vying for attention—biting, scratching and manipulating their way up the ladder of success. We call them ...**UP-wardly mobile**. Has anyone ever heard of a person being **downwardly** mobile?

-Not usually! And yet those are the words Paul uses to describe Jesus—Son of God—showing up in a shed in Bethlehem. **Down** was Jesus' path to greatness. And **down** is what Jesus lived—right to the end. And He **totally** contradicted conventional wisdom by saying that the **path to real life—and greatness—is DOWN**. **If you wanna go UP, you gotta go DOWN**.

It's counter-intuitive isn't it? That the path to **higher ground** goes **down!** And that scares most people way from the kind of greatness that changes others and lasts forever.

- b. This morning I want to talk to you about what I believe is probably the most amazing passage in the Bible. This passage describes better than any other how God showed up here on our planet—and His breath-taking descent into humility. Every truly great person has either **been** humbled—or humbled **them-selves**. But not like this. Not even **close!**

-From a place of power and majesty **we can't even imagine**, Jesus descended. First to a birth in a stable—then to die as a public failure on a cross. It is the single greatest plunge that **anyone** has ever taken. All of this was to conquer something that keeps **us** from humbling ourselves: Self, and all of its ugly siblings: Selfishness, self-centeredness, self-preoccupation, self-indulgence.

- c. What **He** did forces me—and you—to a point of decision: What will I do with the pride in me that threatens my relationship with God and everyone else—**and** what I've been created to do? Where will **I** look for greatness—and where will **you** look for greatness?

-Our world—our **instincts**—say, "Claw your way to the top—step on others if you have to." Jesus said, "The way to greatness is **down!**" They can't both be right.

And **that** means that we have to choose: Is Jesus' way the key to greatness—and real life...or **not**? Is Jesus **right**...or wrong?

2. So, let me read the passage we're talking about. As I read, I want you to think about what you hear and see everyday in our culture, GTA 2020.

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. 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. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the 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. (Philippians 2:1-11 NIV)

-Now, does this describe **anything** that's going on in our culture? Do a little roaming on Facebook and Instagram—or in the corporate offices downtown. It's okay—you'll be wearing a mask and no one will know who you are! From where **I** sit, people seem to be pretty much fixated on themselves.

-In fact, **selfism** has become a kind of artform. I thought **Selfie** sticks were hilarious when they first came out—and bought one as a joke. I now realize that selfies are here to stay!

-Think about how these words sound in a **selfie** world, "You've got to stop being fixated on yourself if you want to be great!" This passage describes self-preoccupation—the enemy of true greatness, with 3 phrases: **selfish ambition, vain conceit, and looking only to your own interests.**

- a. First: **selfish ambition.** In our culture, you could call it the **pecking order.** Years ago, I saw this in a turkey pen—and was **ugly!** A friend in Pennsylvania had raised about a dozen wild turkeys—and by the time I saw them, they were **turklets**—our version of Middle School.

-One of them was bleeding and had a bunch of tail feathers missing. I asked, "What happened to **him?**" He said, "Look at its leg. It was born with a deformed foot. So...the other turkeys peck at it and will kill it—eventually." It was a victim of the **pecking order.**

-And it's true; put 12 chickens or turkeys in a pen, throw in a handful of feed, and by the time the feed is gone, they will have established a hierarchy from 1 to 12—who's first—and who's last.

The #1 chicken pecks at #2 chicken; #2 chicken pecks at #3 chicken--and so on right down to #12—who's pecked at—but doesn't have anyone to peck.

-And the **pecking order** lives on. Have dinner with a bunch of business people, and the conversation will center around **where** they work, **how much** their company made, and **how many** people work for them.

-And we instinctively know what to look for. Titles are helpful--you know, **white** collar, **blue** collar, labor, management, university grad, high school drop-out. And if we don't have a label--we look for other tips. Jewelry, brands of clothing, cars and make-up, hood ornaments, addresses—and dressed up pics of how amazing we are.

-And in our culture, this baggage all gets passed on down to our kids. What **they** hear is that if they want to **stay** on the stage of life, they need to shove others **off** the stage. The Holy Spirit, through Paul, has a title for all this stuff: **get ahead, be first, crush the competition, win at all costs**. It's called **selfish ambition**.

-Isn't it true that most people measure how they're doing based on a comparison with others. That is, being **better** than others, being **more impressive** than other. Ambition is about **getting ahead**. Of **who?** Well others! **Me first!**

-The problem is that Jesus **hated** the pecking order! Could He have won? **Absolutely!** But He wouldn't play the game because it contradicted everything He stood for. He took every opportunity to expose it for how cheap and destructive it really was!

- b. And the next quality is similar. This passage calls it **vain conceit**. The literal word used is **empty glory**. It's **ego**. It's becoming a little god with your own little kingdom. If you're a parent, you've probably heard your kids say at some point: **Hey! Lookit me! Lookit me!!** Why? Cause they **crave** your attention. Guys move into their teen years, show off—then holler at the girls, **Lookit me!** Girls find other ways to say it.

-It's like we're looking for a little stage to perform on. Sometimes it's the pictures we publish of ourselves: **Lookit me! Lookit me!** Sometimes it's in the things we say about ourselves—to prove that we're smarter, more desirable—you know—**better than most!**

-Sometimes this hardens into **vain conceit**: The need to have the biggest, fastest and best; to be the smartest person in the room; to be **right**. We leave subtle—or not so subtle clues about why people are lucky to know us and be around us. This need to be noticed and treated like a little god—special—better than most—is **vain conceit**.

-Just to be clear, the desire for **significance** is not a bad desire. Not at all. It just gets rancid when it's combined with a **bad definition** of greatness. And it's a set up for disappointment cause no one ever says, "You know—I've had **enough attention!**" Attention is maybe the most addictive drug of all!

- c. And the third characteristic of self-centered people is that they're pretty much about themselves and their **own interests**. Think about it; when a person in our culture uses most of their time, money and energy for themselves—what's it called? The answer would be... **normal**. It's just the way most people think. But Jesus said that if we think and live that way, we will ultimately **lose** our souls.

-I don't know about you, but I struggle with **all** this stuff. This need for a little stage—to get my own way—to center my life around myself. The heart is... **what?**
DECEITFUL!

3. So, why do we do it? It's because we **think** it will give us the life we've always wanted. What **no one ever asks is...** "**Well—does it?**" Does being the #1 chicken in the coop, having people notice you, and using all your time, money and energy make you happy and fulfilled? I mean, is it a **satisfying way to life?** From what **I've** seen—no! Cause it's **never enough!** And it alienates you from God and from others. You're **going the wrong way!** The way **up** is **down**.

-See, we **all** die. The truth is that death forces everyone to abdicate the throne. Death makes the pecking order irrelevant—and drags us off center stage. Wouldn't it be sad to have death drag you off center stage—meet Jesus, and realize that you were almost **nothing** like Him—and **that was your calling?** Man, **I** don't want that--and neither do you! So, there's another way—a very unusual way to **true** greatness and significance. It carries **no** regrets.

4. Let me start with this; Jesus raised an issue that just **keeps coming up—all the way through the early records**. I mean, the Spirit of God just keeps singling it out—shining the spotlight on it. Then Paul uses this amazing truth about Jesus **humbling** himself and going to a cross to raise it again. Know what it is? It's **unity!**

-It's about Followers of Jesus valuing it enough to **set their egos aside; to not need to have their own way and their own issues** front and center. Jesus **prayed** that we would be **One**—so that the world would actually believe that He showed up!

-It's not about **cookie cutter Christianity**; about everyone agreeing on all the issues in their era of history. See, our thinking goes like this; "I could live in unity with them if **only they saw things as I see them!**"

No, it's setting our differences aside to agree on and work together on the mission of Jesus: He came to seek and save the lost, to make **all** things right. At the core of his mission is **loving God**—and then **loving others on His behalf!**

-And that means getting **off** the stage—and setting **my interests** aside—for **His** interests! **When we are willing to set aside our egos and selfishness for something GREATER than ourselves** it's clear that we follow **Jesus**--who did that for us! That's what Jesus asked the Father for!

-When followers of Jesus have pursued unity instead of what divides us--the Church has been **awesome!** When we love others enough to **put them before self-interest**, we break new ground, smash Satan's defenses--and bring God's amazing grace to the lost people of

this world. When we ***humble ourselves***—it becomes ***believable*** to a skeptical world that God would humble himself and go to a cross to save us.

- a. But the opposite is ***also*** true. Think about it; what do ***you*** think when you see a group of people who need to be right and to be noticed? What do you think when you see people who are scratching and clawing for their rights and judging people instead of loving them. Whatever they're saying gets ***drowned out!*** When the people of Jesus do that they are ***so unlike Him*** that His message becomes... ***Whatever!*** And the chance we have to live with meaning and true greatness is lost.

-And the ***real*** tragedy is that people get so wrapped up on their need to be right, to be listened to and noticed that the mission of Jesus is actually lost. Sabotaged by squabbling and pride.

And ***that's*** why Paul says, "Followers of Jesus—***do a heart-check.***"

- b. And then he goes through this list. The first heart-check is, ...***if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ.*** Think about it. What does it mean for you to have Jesus through His Spirit living at the very core of your life? Knowing that He's ***chosen*** you and will ***always*** be with you! Does that do anything for your heart?
- c. ...***If you have any comfort from his love.*** Think about it. The God who ***made the universe*** knows you. Personally. Knows your name and ***treasures*** you. Our love ***drifts***—His doesn't—cause it's not based on how well you perform on any given day. He ***finds you desirable!*** Wants to be with ***you***. Likes the sound of your voice! I mean, does that at ***all*** amaze you that the one who knows you ***best***—warts and all—***loves you most?***
- d. And think, for just a minute, about what it means to have the ***fellowship*** of the Spirit—that is, feeling His Presence; knowing ***His*** power to say "No" to what could wreck your life. He's the One who gives you wisdom, reassures you of your ***value*** to God and others. He is, at this moment--***changing*** you! Substituting peace for your anxiety. Aren't you ***glad for that?*** If so—then just cooperate with Him in ***choosing grace, unity and humility***—over SELF!
- e. And He asks a very good question. "Is your heart growing ***more*** tender and compassionate or less? Does ***God embracing you—just as you are—make you want to embrace others.*** People unlike you. Is there something in you that says, "I want to be a kind, generous, selfless person!"
- f. This is a ***very*** important point for us to grasp. When you and I think about ***all we've received*** because Jesus humbled himself to come and rescue us and die in our place—***something should happen in MY heart and YOUR heart!***

-See, there are people who just take and take and take—and then demand ***more!*** They're called—***takers***—not ***lovers!*** And that's not who ***I*** want to be!

5. And Paul gets right in our faces and says, “It’s not enough for God’s love, grace, forgiveness and kindness flow into your life and fill **your** cup; that kind of grace is intended to be **shared!** And when it is, your capacity for love, peace, unity **and greatness** will grow. You’ll move from being a **peace-lover** to a **peace-maker**.
-If you’re with someone right now look at them for a moment. **Are there any limits** to how much God loves and values them? So, be **like-minded**. You value them too. Just **doing** that would settle pretty much every issue of disunity and hostility we experience.
- a. See, our calling isn’t to make excuses about our lack of love—and how we sabotage unity because **we’re right!** God’s **always** right—and He still loves us. We’re to have the **same love**. Unconditional love--love of another kind.

-Love that keeps forgiving—and extends to people who do rotten things to us—even our **enemies!** Love that is patient with people who are different. Love that is **kind, pure-hearted**. Love that looks for opportunities to serve—that looks for the best and **believes** the best--about others.
- b. And we’re to be **one in spirit and purpose**. It just makes sense! Soldiers who want to live don’t fight with fellow soldiers—even if they disagree with them! They fight their common enemy!

-The mission of Jesus is way, **way** more important. The root cause of **all** division among followers of Jesus is **self-interest**. **“I care more about me than I do about you—AND Jesus, for that matter!”** It’s pride. And that’s what we’re called to **humble** ourselves—and get along! His mission needs **everyone!** And you and I don’t get to choose **who!**
- c. That’s why Paul can say with authority, “If you want to follow and be forgiven and changed by Jesus—Who **humbled Himself**—then you need to have the humility to own your own junk. **You’re at the center of your own world—and it needs to stop!**
- d. We not only have to deal with our junk, we have to consciously take **positive** steps. Notice what the first one is. **Humility**. Considering other people as **better** than you. That’s a hard pill to swallow. If it wasn’t in the Bible--I’d throw it out!

-Just imagine how much conflict would instantly dissolve, if we had the humility—and the **courage** to say and mean it, “You know, I think your ideas might be better than mine! I’m not going to take shots at you—cause I don’t like people taking shots at me!”

-We would say, **But...but...but Paul! You don’t know! You haven’t heard my story...about how RIGHT I am and how WRONG they are...!** And then there’s this phrase that cuts right through any leftover excuses. **Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.**

-And that raises the question. So—**what was Jesus' attitude like?** Well, hang on for the ride of your life--because you and I are about to find out how **far** He descended—to be **Lord of all**.

6. In 1972, Vesna Vulovic, a Serbian flight attendant on a DC-9 fell 33,330 feet without a parachute when her plane was blown up by a terrorist bomb over Czechoslovakia—and **survived!** She holds the world record on that one. I don't think I'd like to try to break it! That's quite a descent—but it's **nothing** compared to the descent that Paul describes in this account.

-If you've ever wondered who Jesus was before He showed up in the manger in Bethlehem, this passage tells us. '**Who being in very nature God.**' Paul tells us even more in the letter he wrote to the Colossians.

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. (Colossians 1:15-17 NLT)

- a. That's just the **tip of the iceberg!** And He willingly left it **all** behind. He didn't see his equality with God as something to be grasped, fought for, demanded. Something amazing happened.

Paul's account says, **but He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:7 NIV)**

-The wording says that He **emptied himself**. He literally poured out all His power and capacity as God--so that he could be fully human. God **Himself** became a tiny baby—multiplying cell by cell in Mary's womb. I don't think we have **any** concept of what this meant, and what it involved. Someone has compared it to you or I deciding to set aside our capacity as humans to become ants. **Imagine what kind of descent that would be!**

- b. If you could be the **King of the anthill—SuperAnt**—that would bring some prestige. Not much, but a little. But the Son was born to a young woman who happened to be spending the night in the only available accommodations in Bethlehem--a filthy stable. He was born like every other baby—needing held, changed, breast-fed, and protected. And he was poor—with the label **illegitimate**, hanging over his head.

-It would be a **very** inspiring story if he went from a stable to ruling the world—but it didn't. Not then. He worked construction till he was 30, and then started an itinerant teaching and healing ministry. And even though he did amazing miracles, he was treated with contempt by people who were a big deal in that world.

-What characterized Jesus' life was His **selflessness**. He said, "Come to me —because I'm meek and lowly of heart...**The Son of Man did not come to be**

served, but to serve and to give his life away. To clarify this, on the last night of his life, he took the lowest job anyone could take--stripped down to his underwear and washed feet.

- c. You'd think that would be enough, wouldn't you? From eternity--ageless, perfect knowledge, limitless power, purity—worshipped and obeyed by the **angels** to a largely unknown human being who got tired, needed to eat and sleep, got sore feet and sore muscles—sick to his stomach--indistinguishable from every other human being.

-But the Son wasn't finished descending. Not yet! **And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross.**

-All by itself, death is a humbling experience. All your authority and status vaporizes. Then other people make decisions about what to do with your body and your stuff. But even Jesus' death was unique. He died on a cross. See, Paul knew he'd never die that way; it was against the law to crucify Roman citizen's like him. It was **way** too degrading!

- d. See, crucifixion was **show-time** for all the locals as someone who was **hated** was tortured to death. To be crucified was to be beaten almost to death—your back shredded—and then nailed to a cross—naked, like a butterfly to a piece of cardboard. To even breathe, Jesus had to push up on the spikes through his feet—and he had no control of his bladder or his bowels. Jesus' crucifixion said to the world, "I am a **fake** and a **liar!**"

-After his final shaky breath, Jesus dropped limp. Naked. Blood dripping off the cross-beam, eyes open. The sky grew dark, people went home, but **all of Heaven mourned in reverent silence** as the magnificent Son of God **finally** hit bottom. He had descended as far as He could. It appeared that Satan, the archenemy of Heaven had won.

- e. But we now know that wasn't the end. Jesus Christ, God the Son, only **borrowed** the tomb for 3 days! And because He **willingly** descended—and humbled himself to make a way for **every** stray to come home, all of Heaven cried with joy and gave him a standing ovation as God exalted Him to the highest place in Heaven and on earth!

-We don't see it now, but the name **Jesus**, the earthly name of the Son of God in his humility is now the highest name in all the universe. It's way, **way** above prime minister, president, emperor, king, ruler, sovereign.

-And it's because of **Who He is** and **what He did** that the name of **Jesus** is the only Name where people can find forgiveness, and grace, and hope and life. See, Buddha, Confucius, Joseph Smith, Mohammed, Krishna, Elvis didn't pre-exist as God the Son. They never set aside their rights as God—and selflessly humbled themselves. None of them went to a cross; they all died—and their tombs are **still there.**

f. There are a lot of people in this world who ***simply do not understand*** this—***can't*** believe it and don't want to believe it—so they sneer at His name. Flip it off as a form of disgust or contempt. But one day:

...At the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:11 NIV)

-Someday the ***clarity*** of what happened that Christmas morning 2000 years ago will hit every person who has ever lived: God ***Himself*** descended into greatness.

-And ***every*** knee will bow; Pilate, Hitler, Nietzsche, Osama Bin Laden, Lady Gaga, Donald Trump, John Lennon, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, Richard Dawkins, and Nero the insane emperor who demanded that the world call ***him*** Lord and Savior. Even Satan who once asked Jesus to bow before him—will confess that ***Jesus*** is Lord--***forever***. See, because He ***is!*** For all eternity.

7. I've probably studied this passage more than any other passage in the Bible. It's been the place I've come to again and again to ***remind*** me of who I am—and who Jesus is—and what He did for me—and people I don't even ***like!*** As I've studied—more recently for this series—and thought about ***each word***, I find myself so moved.

-I knew I couldn't adequately explain it. If the entire record of Jesus in the New Covenant is holy ground--this is the ***Holy of Holies***. Who would think that the very One who made —***and runs*** the Universe--the one who deserves to be at the top of every pecking order —is ***selfless, loving and humble to the core!*** And ***that's*** what makes Him great.

-And ***that's*** what makes it so wrong, so repulsive, so petty and small for us to grasp for little shreds of greatness. The question I've already asked myself again and again—and my question as we close today--is this: ***Where do you need to descend into greatness*** to make things right, to bring peace, live in unity, to stop the war in your relational world —and humble yourself? You know, with your parents, your kids, your in-laws, --or your spouse —or your ***ex?*** Where do you need to love, and serve and treat someone as ***better*** than you?

-And my ***second*** question is for those of you who may be new to this—or have maybe flipped it off as remnants of ***once-upon-a-time***. ***When will you bow—and confess Jesus—not just as Savior—but Lord?*** Will you do it ***now?*** See, if you want to be ***great*** —then you need to know that the path is humbling and inconvenient. You can't put yourself and your own interests first—you have to put others first.

-The ***great*** thing is that ***true*** greatness doesn't die with you. It leads unity and power in God's Kingdom. It's greatness ***forever!***

-So, are you move toward Jesus not--or ***wait?*** You know, try all the other paths to greatness, and wait for death to loosen your grasp on the ladder to the top? If you do, there will come a day when you ***do*** bow your knee—and you'll ***realize what you've missed!*** What do you think is the path to true greatness?