



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

The Humility Project

Philippians 2.5–11

David Anguish

Introduction

At a sermon seminar, I did not expect to hear about a book like *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, by Joan Jacobs Brumberg. Her goal in writing it was to explain why “fifty-three percent of our girls are dissatisfied with their bodies by the age of thirteen, and many begin a pattern of weight obsession and dieting as early as eight or nine” (Brumberg 1997, back cover).

To answer, Brumberg researched diary excerpts and media images from the 1830s to the end of the twentieth century. She noted that “girls today make the body into an all-consuming project in ways young women of the past did not” (Brumberg 1997, xvii). In previous generations, “character was built on attention to self-control, service to others, and belief in God—not on attention to one’s own, highly individualistic body project.” Her research revealed that, “before World War I, girls rarely mentioned their bodies in terms of strategies for self-improvement or struggles for personal identity. Becoming a better person meant paying *less* attention to the self” (Brumberg 1997, xx–xxi). As a prelude to a summary of her findings, she cites two representative diary entries to illustrate the change:

In 1892, the personal agenda of an adolescent diarist read: “Resolved, not to talk about myself or feelings. To think before speaking. To work seriously. To be self restrained in conversation and actions. Not to let my thoughts wander. To be dignified. Interest myself more in others.” A century later, in the 1990s, American girls think very differently. In a New Year’s resolution written in 1982, a girl wrote: “I will try to make myself better in any way I possibly can with the help of my budget and babysitting money. I will lose weight, get new lenses, already got new haircut, good makeup, new clothes and accessories.” This concise declaration clearly captures how girls feel about themselves in the contemporary world. Like many adults in American society, girls today are concerned with the shape and appearance of their bodies as a primary expression of their individual identity (Brumberg 1997, xxi).

As noted, I heard about this book at a sermon seminar, in a presentation by Bruce McLarty. He

recommended it to illustrate why the second chapter of Philippians is so hard for modern American Christians to hear. In that text, Paul

called for the Philippians to turn their eyes in a direction that is unnatural for people: away from self and toward the interests and needs of others. This has always been difficult for human beings, but in the pop-psychologized culture of modern America it is viewed as pathological! (McLarty 2007, 4).

We should also take note of the fact that Brumberg points out the problem she identified in girls is in fact a problem in American society generally. Boys face it, too, for the same reason girls do: it's what they've learned from their adult role models. It's not just the girls' problem, it's *our* problem.

Philippians 2.1–4 reminds us that, besides being a problem with potentially explosive results, it's one Christ-followers should correct. Paul knew it would take serious thought and determination and that it would be helpful to see examples of how to do it. So, he points to Timothy and Epaphroditus (2.19–26) and to himself (3.2–17). But first, he points to Jesus.

A Text that Evokes Awe

Philippians 2.5–11 is a profoundly powerful statement of what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus, so powerful that some have seen it as more a digression than integral to Paul's argument, reasoning that "one does not roll out a cannon to shoot a rabbit" (Fred Craddock, *Philippians*, in McLarty 2007, 5). What about the passage evokes such awe? Since around the beginning of the twentieth century, most scholars have seen verses 6–11 as a hymn, one that was either adapted by Paul or composed by him. Whether a hymn or not, it is an amazingly compact statement of the "basic plot line that elaborates Christ's descent from some heavenly state to the earthly realm" (Fowl 1998, 142).

But it does not tell the story for the story's sake. Rather, it aims to use what the Philippians knew about Jesus to encourage them to live the right way. We see this first in the command to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (v 5 NRSV).¹ We also see it in the way the poem functions in the section from 1.27–2.18. To live in a way that is worthy of the gospel is to seek to remain united (1.27–30). Unity requires us to follow a way that is radically different from what is typical (2.1–4). Following the example of Jesus, we should reject factionalism (2.14) and shine as brighter lights (2.15–16) (cf. Fowl 1998, 147).

But that is not all Paul emphasizes. The goal of Christ's life and subsequent exaltation was "so that" (ἵνα, *hina*, v. 10) every knee should bend in submission and every tongue should confess Jesus as Lord for the purpose (εἰς, *eis*) of bringing "glory to God the Father" (v 11). The "glory of God" receives repeated emphasis in Philippians (1.11; 3.19, 21; 4.20; the idea also appears in 4.19). Indeed, as Larry Hurtado observes, "this universal acclamation of Jesus [in vv. 9–11] is also intended to serve 'the glory of God the Father.' Verses 9–11 give the ultimate outcome of the actions narrated in the entire passage" (Hurtado 2005, 103).

A Text that Models Christ's Way

When we examine it structurally, we see a remarkable plot line in verses 6–8, its action carried

along by the three indicative verbs, “regard,” “emptied,” and “humbled.” On the one hand, even though Jesus was existing in the “form of God,” he “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (v. 6). Instead, he “emptied himself” (κενῶω, *kenoō* - see “conceit” [“empty glory”] in v. 3), a declaration amplified by the participle phrases, “taking the form of a slave” and “being born in human likeness” (v. 7). Finding himself in human form,² he “humbled [ταπεινῶω, *tapeinoō* - see “humility” in v. 3] himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (vv. 7b–8).

The idea that helps most in seeing Paul’s point is the phrase in verse 8, “something to be exploited” [ἀρπαγμός, *harpagmos*]. The phrase, “in the form of God” has been much debated; it is best explained by “something to be exploited,” that is, “something to take advantage of.” The point is not that he somehow left some of his deity behind when he came to earth, but that he refused to use his deity to gain an advantage. That view fits with the wilderness temptation accounts (Matt 4.1–11 = Luke 4.1–13) and the general assessment of his temptation by the writer of Hebrews (Heb 4.15). As N. T. Wright explains,

This is not ... a matter of not adopting, in his incarnate existence, a life-style of divine splendour, whatever that might mean in practice. The emphasis of v. 7 shows that the refusal described by the phrase was a refusal to use for his own advantage the glory which he had from the beginning (Wright 1993, 83).³

Furthermore, as Hurtado observes, this refusal on Jesus’s part is “all the more impressive in that what he chose not to use for his own advantage is precisely what some arrogant humans were known to have sought in vain to obtain for themselves” (Hurtado 2005, 100).

A Text that Challenges Us

When we think seriously about the practical implications of Philippians 2.5–11, we are confronted with three challenges.

First, it forces us to face our tendency to self-promotion against Jesus’s example. If he could give up what he gave up—and submit to the extent to which he submitted—how can we who follow him not seek to do the same?

Second, it makes us ask ourselves whether we really believe Jesus when he says, immediately after Peter’s confession, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt 16.25). Think about that statement again in light of Philippians 2.9–11.

Third, it confronts us with the reality that something that is so radically different from the world’s norms will not just happen. Rather, it must be done intentionally, understanding that what governs all of verses 6–11 is the *command* in verse 5.⁴

Conclusion

While I was an undergrad at Freed-Hardeman University in west Tennessee, a student who had grown up in the northeast U. S. was there for a time. He had no church background and so found our general outlook puzzling. Several times during the short time he was there, he

candidly expressed his bewilderment that so many were pursuing careers that were more interested in service than success.

As *The Body Project* illustrates, the service-orientation is increasingly out of step with much of our culture. And, though we try to justify it in various ways, the truth is that we who profess allegiance to Jesus are often enticed by the same temptation. In our honest moments, we know it doesn't ultimately fulfill, but the temptation remains strong.

Jesus shows the better way, a way of peace and obedience that is also the way to an abundant life (John 10.10). Is it time for us to change our minds and let his mind direct us to more fully embrace his way?

www.davidanguish.com

Works Cited

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Notes

¹ Because I find it to be a better rendering of the Greek in these verses, especially in translating the verbs (except for the participle "becoming" in v. 8), I am using the NRSV in this sermon instead of the ESV.

² For the words translated "form," Paul uses μορφή, *morphē*, in verses 6–7a, and σχῆμα, *schēma* in v. 7b.

³ In a subsequent comment, Wright adds, "The real humiliation of the incarnation and the cross is that one who was himself God, and who never during the whole process stopped being God, could embrace such a vocation" (Wright 2005, 84).

⁴ "Have this mind" translates φρονεῖτε (*phroneite*), a present active imperative plural verb that applies to everyone.