

The Way Up is Down  
Philippians 2:1-13  
Luke 6:43-45

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### Philippians 2:1-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

### Luke 6:43-45

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”

In Lewis Carroll’s famous book, *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice steps through the mirror to find herself in a world where everything is backwards. When she tries to go forward, she ends up back where she started. She tries to go left and she ends up right. Going up sends her down, and running as fast as she can barely allows her to stay in one place.

Paul explains in his letter this morning that the way the world really works, and the way we should act as Christians, is backwards from how we sometimes, shortsightedly, think the world works.

To be blessed, you need to be a blessing to others. To be loved, love others. To be honored, first be humble. To truly live, die to yourself. To gain the unseen, let go of the seen. To receive anything, first give it. To save your life, lose it. To lead, serve. To be first, be last.

Paul tells his readers in Philippi, and us, that we need to have “the attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.”

He explains that Jesus is God. Jesus is, by rights, entitled to worship and glory and power, forever and ever, amen. Jesus chose to live a human life and not to exploit the power that he had as God.

Jesus did use the power of God do miracles, but he did them all for the benefit of other people. The only times the Gospels mention him even thinking about using the power of God to do miracles on his own behalf is during his temptation in the desert, when he refuses.<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus became a human being, he did not even become a rich and powerful celebrity. Jesus lived the life of an ordinary human being, in a backwater province of the Roman Empire. He was not even a Roman citizen, with the limited rights that they had. Jesus lived by the rules of being a politically powerless human being, even dying on the cross.

Dying on a cross was not something that happened to respectable people. Dying on the cross was a barbaric, intentionally horrific way to die. People were nailed to the cross and left there to die of some combination of thirst, slow suffocation, and exposure to the elements. There were soldiers there, but they were just there to make sure that nobody rescued one of the condemned or helped him to die more quickly. Dying with any kind of dignity was already out of the question, but quick would have been an improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 4.

Rich and respectable Romans did not die by crucifixion. Rich Romans, if they had to die, died quickly, by poison or the sword. Poor people died by crucifixion. Poor people and slaves and those who had posed some kind of a threat to the establishment.

Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, was not just killing people who were crucified. He was asserting Roman power and authority and dominance by publicly humiliating these people. They were stripped naked, so that they looked small, not like a king at all. They were flogged, a punishment usually reserved for slaves. They would die in public, so that everyone could see them in literally excruciating pain. Everyone could hear them beg for water and then struggle for breath, becoming increasingly desperate over time. Everyone could see that they had no power. Everyone could see that they were losers. Everyone could see them completely broken. It was the ultimate in degradation.

Jesus did not just go from being properly recognized as God to being seen as human. He went from being properly recognized as God to being seen as the most degraded human being possible, barely recognizable as human at all.

In a world where we are told that our goal in life should be upward mobility, Jesus chose extreme downward mobility.

These things are not news. I am not telling you all things that you don't know. I'm reminding you of things that we've all heard so many times, that they start to become like wallpaper – all around us, but we don't even notice.

A Greek or Roman deity might look like a human being for a day to play tricks, but the only consequences for his actions would come from other deities. He would never accept human consequences for his actions. It is unimaginable that Zeus would “empty himself, taking the form

of a slave.” The whole point of a story like that would be Zeus’s power to mess with humans and that humans couldn’t do anything about it.

Zeus was a deity worshipped by Emperors and those who wanted to be like Emperors. Worshipping Zeus was a religion for the so-called “winners” in this world, the people who have power and who use it to dominate all those around them. This was the way that the Roman Empire worked. This is the way that empires work in general, whether we’re talking about Roman legions holding the power, or the British East India Company, or a multinational corporation today.

The thing about this kind of power, though, is that it is limited. No matter how much of this kind of dominating power you have, it always has a limit. Those who wield this kind of power are always insecure that someone else might take their power away from them. So they flaunt their power, trying to look even more impressive than they are, to make sure that no one challenges them.

Jesus took the opposite approach. Jesus does not need to dominate all those around him. He is incredibly secure. He has so much power, so much authority, that he does not have to flaunt it. He can be understated about it.

He can choose to give up all external signs of his power and authority, and live the life of a very ordinary human being. And he is still God. Human beings could do anything they liked to him, but they could not take that away from him. They could kill him, but he was resurrected.

So, what does that mean for us?

It means that displays of our power and dominance and authority in this world do not impress this God whom we worship. He is the rightful owner of all power and dominance and authority, and eventually every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

It means that, if we want to follow Jesus, we need to take our cue from Alice. The way up is down.

Let me remind you of something you already know. God knows you better than you know yourself. And God still loves you. God loves you so much, that he sent Jesus down here to live a human life, die, and be resurrected, for you.

God does not withhold love until you get good enough. God stoops to our level, scoops us up in all our messiness, and loves us. This is how we can be healed and saved. God works in ordinary people like us to change us and to make us into the extraordinary people he wants us to be.

Nobody can take that away from you. No human being has that power. Not your parents, not your children, not a pastor, not “The Church.” Not even you.

You are a beloved child of God, whether anybody else likes it or not.

You are a beloved child of God, whether even you like it or not.

That is something that still amazes me, every time I think about it.

So, now, if we want to live into that relationship with the God who loves us that way, the way up is down.

We have nothing to be insecure about.

We have nothing to prove.

We don't have to be rich. We don't have to be powerful. We don't have to be "winners."

We don't have to surround ourselves with people like that.

We can be ourselves with the poor and the outcasts and the "losers," the people who would never be welcome in the inner corridors of worldly power.

That's where we will find Jesus.

When he walked the Earth, not once did Jesus set foot in the Imperial Palace in Rome. The closest he got to centers of worldly power was when he was brought into Herod's palace and Pilate's house in Jerusalem as a prisoner. It's that downward mobility thing.

When his disciples started arguing about who among them was the most important, he told them that the one who wanted to be first among them had to be the last. That hasn't changed.

When each of us dies and sees Christ, which I am convinced we will, the discussion will not be about whether we were large and in charge, or whether we made other people do things right. That's not the kind of person that the Gospels show us Jesus was.

The discussion will be about how we lived, and about how we showed Christ's love to the people around us. Whether those people were right or wrong.

So, your challenge for this week, is not to make everyone around you live right. You won't succeed, and it's not the way that Jesus did things.

Your challenge for this week is to be kind to someone who can't do anything to pay you back, someone who does not have the power to help you.

Because the way up is down.

AMEN.