

“Shall we take the form of a slave?”

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13

from the first pew, First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
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What are you devoted to?

Some of us are devoted to our past times. To golf. To reading. To bridge. Some of us are wildly devoted to our team. Some of us are devoted to a good time, to our family, to our jobs.

What are you devoted to?

Paul suggests that Christians be devoted to God. The example Paul lifts up, of course, is Jesus. Be devoted to God like Jesus was devoted to God. But we find scandal in Paul’s words. Jesus was devoted to the point he chose to become a slave.

Listen to Paul:

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross.

Some versions of the Bible translate that word “servant.” Yes, Jesus was a servant to God and neighbor. But that’s not the word Paul used. Jesus emptied himself, taking the form not of a “servant” but of a “slave.” Jesus consented to serve God and neighbor with his whole life—and Paul likens this kind of total service, this total commitment, this giving over of himself to the ways of God—Paul likens this kind of total service to *slavery*.

I want to be careful with that word. I don’t pretend to know its full weight or power. The word “slave” suggests a darkness and blight in American history, indeed, in world history.

But Paul does not suggest that Jesus was sold into slavery, or that Jesus was owned by others and was mere chattel, no. Jesus—

did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave . . .

Jesus claimed this identity. He chose it. He took it. Nothing was taken from him—it was given. Note the difference.

I still don't like the word. I like the word "servant" better. But that's not the word Paul uses. He uses the word "slave." One commentator puts it this way: "[O]ver use of the translation 'servant' can mask the absolute domination, harshness, and social death that the original language describes" (p 299 Interpreter's Bible Dictionary, vol 5).

Jesus is the kind of servant to give his all. His whole self. He became a slave in the absolute service of God and God's people.

Are we called to be devoted like that? Are we called to take the form of a slave as we serve God and neighbor? Are we to give ourselves as fully and as completely as that?

Ghandi famously said, "I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." I think the reason we are so different from Jesus is that we have allowed ourselves to become enslaved by all the wrong things.

Slavery to God means freedom from self. Total service to God means we become dialed into something "other." "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit," writes Paul, "but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." In other words, be a slave to the causes of God's justice and God's peace, pour yourself out for those noble causes. Christ sets the example. And what a beautiful, tough example Jesus sets.

This passage from Philippians gets us thinking about this question differently: What am I devoted to?

When I see Jesus' devotion, I am ashamed to think of my paltry devotion. I am ashamed and sorry that God gets only *some* of my attention, and that I am so deeply devoted to such lesser things.

When I see Jesus' devotion, I am also glad. Glad that in Jesus I am reminded profoundly of who I am invited to follow. I want to be in fellowship with Jesus. I want to serve like him, and love like him, and laugh like him, and listen like him, and live like him.

"Let the same mind be in you," Paul says. "Though Jesus 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."

In our me-first, self-serving culture, we often choose to enrich, serve, coddle, and luxuriate in our lives, our happiness, our rights, our dreams, our needs and desires, our family, our past times.

But Paul reminds us of a better option. We can think beyond ourselves to God and to others. And we can follow the One who gave his life in service to others to the point that Paul called him a slave.

If I am to be a slave, let me be a slave to that. Only to that.

Let us pray:

*O God, I'm not there yet.
While I want to follow,
I can never imagine following
so ardently and so completely
as your Son.*

*But please, nevertheless, accept
my stumbling efforts, and by
your grace, guide my steps,*

in the name of the One

*whose humility and grace
inspire me to serve with
all my heart.*

Help me, Holy Lord.

And thank you, Holy Lord.

*In Jesus' name,
In Jesus' perfect name,
I pray . . .*

AMEN

SECOND READING PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13 1If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross.
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

12Therefore, 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; 13for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to
will and to work for his good pleasure.