

With Us

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Character Focus: Jesus

Scripture Texts: 2 Corinthians 8:1-12; Philippians 2:1-11

Lesson Synopsis: Participants will be invited to consider the Incarnation from the angles of the love of Jesus that caused him to take on human flesh and the example that he set for believers in doing so. Of special importance for application will be themes of generosity and humility.

Digging In

Incarnation

[I believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

-Nicene Creedⁱ

The above segment of the Nicene Creed shows the high view of Jesus that was eventually agreed upon by the early church. This creed, dating to the fourth century AD, names Jesus as “God of God,” “Light of Light,” “very God of very God,” and in doing so assigns to him divinity. This statement flew in the face of other understandings of Jesus that saw him as a human adopted by God or as part of the created order. After heated debate on these topics, Jesus’ divinity was protected in the official theology of the Church.

While this development is rather late in relation to the earthly life of Jesus (three centuries separate Jesus from the Nicene Creed), it is important to note that such high views of Christ were nothing new to the Christian community. Indeed, the writings of the New Testament itself attest to Jesus’ high standing. John 1:1 serves as a prime example of this in stating, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Philippians 2:6 describes Jesus as “in very nature God,” joining its voice to the same chorus. These passages stand as explicit statements of Jesus’ divinity, and they are joined by other passages that, while not explicit, point in the same direction.ⁱⁱ These early writers would not have used the same language or had the same

understanding of Jesus' divinity that emerged in later centuries, but they nonetheless attest to the same reality.

With all of this in mind, the Christmas story that we have studied for the past month takes on a new significance. Thus far, we have seen the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth and have heard profound titles assigned to him. In thinking of Jesus' divinity, though, we add another layer to an already astounding story. The Son of God is God the Son - "God of God," "Light of Light," "very God of very God." In the manger, we see God become flesh, and we can only stand amazed.

The theological term for God taking human flesh is "incarnation," and it refers to the entirety of Jesus' life. As John McGuckin explains, "[incarnation] stands ... for the whole nexus of events of the life, teachings, sufferings, and glorification of the Lord..."ⁱⁱⁱ In the manger, we see the beginning of incarnation, but it is only the beginning, for Jesus will grow, preach, heal, die, and rise. In this, we see the tremendous commitment of God to his creation. God the Son takes on the vulnerabilities of flesh. We see those vulnerabilities writ large as Jesus is crucified on the cross, but we see them in the manger as well. The infinite has become finite and lays completely dependent on his mother. St. Augustine caught the beautiful irony of this moment in saying:

"He lies in a manger, but contains the world. He feeds at the breast, but also feeds the angels. He is wrapped in swaddling clothes, but vests us with immortality. He found no place in the inn, but makes for Himself a temple in the hearts of believers. In order that weakness might become strong, strength became weak." (Sermon 190 3, 4)

In the incarnation, we see the profound self-giving of God on display. As Augustine puts it, for the sake of his creation, the God who is strong becomes weak.

The incarnation obviously offers food for thought concerning the love and commitment of God to his creation. Beyond this, it also serves as an example to God's people. This is Paul's use of incarnational language. Twice in his letters, he references the incarnation (though he does not use the term, which comes later in Church history), and in both instances Paul uses the concept to encourage believers to specific actions in the Christian life. We turn to these ethical understandings of the incarnation now.

2 Corinthians 8:1-12

2 Corinthians 8 and 9 have much to say about giving. In fact, chapter 9 holds one of the more celebrated verses on the topic. If you have ever heard a preacher say, "God loves a cheerful giver" (9:7b), you have come into contact with these chapters in 2 Corinthians. While sermons drawn from these passages often revolve around tithing, it is important to note that the setting for the giving Paul encourages is a collection for poor Christians. In both 8:4 and 9:1, the collection is called a "service to the Lord's

people,” and 8:13-14 makes it clear that this “service” is to the needy. These verses state, “Our desire is not that others **might be relieved** while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time **your plenty will supply what they need**, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality...” (emphases mine). While the needy recipients of the collection are not named in 2 Corinthians, Romans 15:26 speaks of Macedonian Christians who “were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem.” These same Macedonian Christians are the topic of 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, where Paul praises their generosity. All of this in mind, moneys are being collected for needy Christians in Jerusalem. Giving in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 refers, then, to mutual financial care among Christian groups of different ethnicities and different regions. While we can apply the same concepts to tithing, we should be careful to keep in focus the tangible care for brothers and sisters in Christ that is encouraged in these chapters.

Focusing now on 2 Corinthians 8:1-12, the passage stands as an exhortation for the Corinthian congregation to follow through on a promise to give to the Jerusalem collection. While the promise was made in zeal, that zeal seems to have diminished with the passing of time (vv 10-11). Paul therefore tells the story of the Macedonian congregation, whose own zeal for the collection surpassed his expectations (vv 1-5). According to Paul, the Macedonian Christians lived in “extreme poverty” (v 2) but were generous nonetheless. Indeed, “they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability” (v 3). More than this, “they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people” (v 4). In this it sounds as if Paul’s original plan was to spare this poor congregation the burden of the collection or to at least put a cap on their giving, but the Macedonians would have nothing to do with this thinking, logical though it may have been. Instead, they gave from their poverty in joy.

Having spoken highly of the Macedonian Christians, Paul moves to remind the Corinthians of their promise. In doing so, Paul places the Corinthians in a kind of holy rivalry with the Macedonians (v 8). It is important to note here, however, that the amount of the collection is not the content of the rivalry. Instead, “The amount does not matter; the spirit behind the giving does.”^{iv} Paul, then, is not seeking to manipulate the Corinthians into ponying up more cash than the Macedonians. Rather, he is using the example of the Macedonians to remind the Corinthians to give in joy. At stake for the Corinthians is not only fulfilling the promise of giving, but also the need to give with right attitudes.

With the example of the Macedonians driving his encouragement to the Corinthians to give in joy, Paul moves to the even greater example of Jesus. He states in v 9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” This is an allusion to the incarnation. God the Son, who was rich in his equality with God, became poor by taking on human flesh. Importantly, this move to poverty accomplished

something; humans who were poor in their sin became rich through the salvation Christ offers. In speaking of the incarnation in this way, Paul no longer points only to the example of another congregation. Instead, “Christ’s sacrifice becomes the real motive for giving, not trying to copy or outdo some sibling community.”^v Jesus, in his incarnation, lays a pattern of generosity for believers to follow. As has been shown, Paul’s purpose throughout the passage at hand is to encourage the Corinthian church to excel in joyful generosity. In making this appeal, Paul looks first to the exemplary Macedonian congregation. It is not long, though, before he moves to the even greater example of Jesus, who in his incarnation gave generously of himself so that those who put their faith in him might become rich.

Philippians 2:1-11

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is a letter concerned with unity, and 2:1-11 certainly fits within this broader theme. In this brief section, Paul calls the Philippian congregation to both take up practices that promote unity and put off practices that destroy it. In exploring the passage, it will be helpful to divide it into three sections that will be discussed below. The first section is found in v 1, where Paul begins his argument with a loaded question. In effect, he asks the Philippians whether or not they believe that there is (1) “encouragement in Christ,” (2) “comfort from love,” (3) “sharing in the Spirit,” and (4) “affection and sympathy” (ESV). Todd Still identifies in these categories “Christological [1], pneumatological [3], ecclesiological [2], and ethical concerns [4]” that Paul most certainly assumed should be both accepted and experienced in the Philippian community.^{vi} The answer, then, is a given. It’s as if Paul is saying, “Of course you experience these things in your relationship to God and one another! And if this is true, then you should act in a certain way.” He’ll detail that way of acting in the following section.

The second section of Paul’s argument is found in vv 2-4, in which Paul instructs the Philippians to take on and put off practices that affect their unity. Because they do believe and experience the different pieces of v 1, Paul asks them to “make [his] joy complete “by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (v 2). These are broad categories that can be elusive in practice, so Paul moves on to name very specific

A Note on Translation

The NIV translates the first part of v 1 as “...if you have any encouragement from Christ, if any comfort from his love...” The ESV is closer to the Greek in translating this same section, “...if there is any encouragement in Christ, and comfort from love.” The differences are found in the ESV looking to statements of fact instead of experience (“if there is” instead of “if you have”) and making love general rather than connected specifically to Christ. This lesson moves with the ESV because it is closer to the original Greek.

ways that the Philippians can encourage unity in their midst. First, they should “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.” These are attitudes that the Philippians should put off because they are toxic to healthy community. Even as Paul instructs the congregation to put off these attitudes, he encourages them to put on another: humility. This humility leads to “valu[ing] others above yourselves” and is expressed in “not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” The Philippians, then, should put off selfishness and take on humility that values others highly. Gordon Fee helpfully clarifies this instruction in saying, “...it is not so much that others in the community are to be thought of as ‘better than I am,’ but as those whose needs and concerns ‘surpass’ my own.”^{vii} In humility, the Philippians are to look to the needs of others in the community. Of course, if everyone is looking to everyone else’s needs, then no one’s needs go unmet. This is humility that leads to mutual care. In this line of thought, unity is grounded in the very practical practice of caring for one another.

The third section of Paul’s argument is found in vv 5-11, which ground what has gone before in the example of Christ. As with 2 Corinthians 8:9, the incarnation is once again on display with ethical force. Paul describes Jesus vividly as not considering his equality with God to be “used to his own advantage” (v6). Instead, Jesus “made himself nothing by taking on the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” and “humbled himself by becoming obedient to death” (vv 7-8). Here we see Paul speaking of both Jesus’ incarnation and death, for both put on display the kind of humility that Paul is encouraging the Philippians to embrace. Jesus looked to the needs of humanity rather than guarding his own standing and humbled himself in service. No wonder Paul tells the Philippians to “have the same mindset as Jesus Christ” (v5)!

Another Note on Translation

V 6 has proven a puzzle for translators for quite some time. The KJV translates the difficult section, “thought it not robbery to be equal with God,” while the ESV translates the same portion, “did not count equality with God something to be grasped.” Recent scholarship points to a translation like the 2011 NIV’s “did not consider equality with God to be used to his own advantage.” This last translation points to the idea that being like God is to be self-giving rather than using one’s power for oneself. This is provocative because rather than saying something about Jesus, it says something about divinity. To be equal with God is to give! This is the translation used here.

Application

Often when we think of the love of Jesus, we jump directly to his sacrificial death on the cross. This makes sense in light of the agony that Jesus endured on our behalf. It is awe-inspiring to consider his commitment to the Father's plan of reconciliation. Perhaps we should also consider the incarnation when we think of Jesus' love, though. 2 Corinthians describes it as the rich becoming poor, and Philippians tells us that the one who was equal with God became nothing in taking human form. In the incarnation, we have God the Son putting aside the privileges of divinity to become human. Importantly, Christian doctrine affirms Jesus as 100% God and 100% man. We therefore want to be careful in speaking of Jesus putting aside his divine nature. Certainly we can speak of his limiting himself and becoming vulnerable in becoming human, though. This in itself is an act of love that precedes the cross. The love of Jesus is present in the manger!

Beyond considering the love of Jesus that led to his incarnation, it is also helpful to see that the incarnation serves as an example for Jesus' followers. Of course, we are not God and cannot actually follow God the Son in becoming human. Principles of generosity and humility are laid out in the incarnation, though, and these are marching orders for Christ's people. The rich becomes poor so that the poor can become rich. The one who is equal with God becomes a servant in human form. As we consider the incarnation, we can consider our own commitments to generous self-giving and humble service. In regard to generosity, it is important to remember that it should be teamed with joy. In regard to humility, we must remember that this is not a false humility that calls us to belittle ourselves but is instead a humility that allows us to look to the needs of others.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, "What is your favorite food in the Christmas season?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Introduction: Remind the class of December's Advent focus. Then let them know that today's lesson will focus on the Advent theme of incarnation as we examine the

Incarnation:

- **Question:** Ask participants to relate what they know of the incarnation.
 - **Important Points:**
 - Incarnation refers to God becoming human.

- Before taking flesh, Jesus was the preexistent member of the Trinity.
 - Jesus was 100% man and 100% God.
- **Explain:** When we think of the manger scene, we see more than a miraculous birth. We also see God the Son become Son of Man.
- **Question:** What would it mean for God to become human? (He would have to limit himself, become vulnerable, etc.)
- **Question:** What does the incarnation tell us about the love of Jesus?

Incarnation and Generosity:

- **Explain:** While the incarnation helps us to reflect on the love of God, it also lays a pattern for Christian living that we will see in two passages.
- **Scripture Passage:** Ask a class member to read 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.
 - **Question:** Ask participants to summarize the passage thus far.
 - Why is Paul impressed with the Macedonian Christians?
 - What does Paul tell us about the wealth of the Macedonians?
 - **Explain:** Explain that Paul was taking up a collection for the poor Jerusalem church and that the Macedonians exceeded his expectations by giving out of their “extreme poverty” (see 2 Corinthians 8:1-12 section for more on this).
- **Scripture Passage:** Ask a class member to read 2 Corinthians 8:6-8 and 10-12.
 - **Question:** Ask participants to summarize what Paul is saying to the Corinthians.
 - Why does Paul send Titus? (v6)
 - What is “the act of grace” that Titus is supposed to bring to completion? (v 6)
 - Why has Paul already talked about the generosity of the Macedonian church? (v 8)
 - What is the Corinthians’ history with Paul’s collection for the poor in the Jerusalem church? (vv 10-11)
 - **Question:** Ask participants to identify Paul’s point in this passage (See 2 Corinthians 8:1-12 section for more on this).
- **Scripture Passage:** Have a class member read 2 Corinthians 8:9.
 - **Question:** Ask participants what this passage tells us about Jesus.
 - What does it mean that Jesus was rich and became poor?
 - How do believers become rich through Jesus’ poverty?
 - **Question:** Ask participants why Paul talks about the incarnation in this passage.
- **Question:** Ask participants how Christians can emulate the generosity of Jesus in this passage.
- **Question:** Invite people to tell stories of when they have been generous or been recipients of generosity.

- **Question:** Ask participants how generous is generous enough.

Incarnation and Humility

- **Scripture Passage:** Ask a class member to read Philippians 2:1.
 - **Question:** Ask participants to name the four pieces of this verse (encouragement in Christ, consolation from love, etc.).
 - **Question:** Ask participants to raise their hands if they believe that:
 - Christ's love is encouraging
 - The love of the church should be consoling
 - Christians share in the Holy Spirit
 - The church should be a place of compassion and sympathy
 - **Explain:** When Paul says "if" at the beginning of the verse, there is really no question of the answer. Instead, it is like he asked a loaded question. If this is the case (and of course it is), then...
- **Scripture Passage:** Ask a class member to read Philippians 2:2
 - **Question:** Ask participants to summarize the "then" of Paul's argument. Because the "if" of v. 1 is true, what three things should the Philippians do?
 - What are concrete ways that these three things can be lived out?
 - **Explain:** Explain that Paul gives concrete ways in the next two verses.
- **Scripture Passage:** Have a class member read Philippians 2:3-4.
 - **Question:** What should the Philippians not do?
 - Why is it important that they not act out of selfish ambition or vain conceit?
 - **Question:** What *should* the Philippians do?
 - **Question:** According to v 5, what does it mean to humbly "value others above yourselves?"
 - **Explain:** Explain that humility does not point to bad self-esteem or devaluing ourselves. Instead, it allows us to care for the needs of others before our own.
 - **Question:** Ask participants if Paul is giving good advice. How might things go wrong if we were to humbly look after the needs of others before our own? (People will probably talk about getting taken advantage of or their own needs not being met.)
 - **Question:** What would happen if everyone in the community was looking after the needs of everyone else?
 - **Explain:** Because Paul calls everyone to this, he is calling the entire community to mutual service. In a perfect world, everyone's needs would be met under this scheme. Moreover, if someone were to take advantage of other congregants, this would be an occasion for loving challenge since selfish ambition and vain conceit should not be present in the community.

- **Scripture Passage:** Have a class member read Philippians 2:5-11.
 - **Question:** Why does Paul talk about Jesus here?
 - **Question:** In what ways does Jesus display the humble service described in vv 3-4?
 - **Explain:** This passage speaks of both the incarnation and death of Jesus as examples of humbly looking to the needs of others.
 - **Question:** What are concrete ways that we can serve each other in the church?
 - **Question:** Allow participants to share any experiences of serving or being served in the church.

Closing Points

- The incarnation helps us to contemplate the love of God and calls us to generosity and humble service.

ⁱ For the full creed, see: <https://www.ccel.org/creeds/nicene.creed.html>.

ⁱⁱ See, for instance, the stories of Jesus walking on the water in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Only God is said to walk on the water in the OT, and Jesus says, "I Am," when the disciples see him. This is a story that equates Jesus with God through narrative and the use of OT imagery. See David Garland's commentary on this passage in the NIV Application Commentary on Mark.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, 1st ed, The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 180.

^{iv} David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary v. 29 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 366.

^v *Ibid.*, 378.

^{vi} Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys Pub, 2011), 61.

^{vii} Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1995), 189.