

A Life Patterned on Christ: Philippians 2

Reflections for the Lausanne Orthodox Initiative Consultation, November 6, 2019

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One of my earliest memories from my childhood is sitting in the middle of a prayer meeting in Iraq, listening to Jesuit priests and protestant missionaries pray and sing and laugh together. It is an impression, a sense of what I now consider to be a pattern of the Spirit of Christ moving in and through his people. Many times throughout the years I have heard and felt that same Spirit as I meet other Christians- haven't you have felt this too? There is a family resemblance which can't be seen with the eyes, but is rather felt with the heart. This pattern, this congruence, this exact match of life, of speech, of being, is a mark of the disciples of Christ.

In the ancient world, discipleship was more than just acceptance of a person's teaching. It required the disciple to actively imitate both the life and the teaching of the master. It was a deliberate apprenticeship which made the fully formed disciple a living copy, an exact pattern- or in geometric terms: congruent- with the master. The discipleship was not complete until this pattern was all the way through the person- inside and out.

Eugene Peterson, in the introduction to his book, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, describes a time in which his entire ministry shifted. He was a young pastor, with a new church plant, determined to create the biggest and best church in his town. He faithfully followed his denominational directives. He preached and measured attendance and optimized his services and looked at the financial bottom line. But as he worked hard at his ministry he became aware that while on the outside he was doing everything right, on the inside he was beginning to see his congregation as a means to an end. His stated beliefs did not connect with his internal motivations. His life was incongruent.

And two things happened. The first is that he attended a lecture by a man he greatly admired, whose books he had read for years, Paul Tournier. This Swiss physician had begun to treat not just physical ailments, but the whole person- body, mind and spirit- in relational settings. While listening to Tournier speak, Peterson was struck by the realization that "this man wrote what he lived and lived what he wrote... a life of congruence, with no slippage between what he was saying and the way he was living."¹ This congruence resonated with Peterson's soul, and exposed the deep divide in his own life's work. A few weeks later he came across Hopkins' poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" which uses images from nature to describe moments in time when a created thing does what it was created to be: the kingfisher, a bird, flies towards the sun and catches the light in such a way that his wings flash like fire, the moments when stones

¹ Peterson, Eugene. (2017). *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* (Kindle Version). (pp. xv-xx).

tumble in a stream and ring like bells, as Hopkins says: each natural self “Crying what I do is me; for that I came”. When those of us in Christ “act In God’s eye what in God’s eye he is- Christ” by bringing glory to the Father, we are living congruent lives.²

Peterson’s ministry was never the same. These two experiences set him on a life-long journey towards becoming who he is in Christ. Isn’t this the call and purpose of our lives as Christians? To BE Who we ARE, and in so doing bring glory to God the Father? As we look at our passage this morning, let’s keep in mind this thought:

It is necessary that the disciples of Christ live a life that is so patterned after Christ, so congruent with his thoughts and actions, that Christ is recognizable in us and through us.

Within the hymn to Christ in verses 5-12, we can see both the example and the means to accomplish this task. We will look first at the humility of Christ as our example and then consider our own way towards humility as we lift up Christ.

Read Philippians 2: 5-11

First, we can see that Christ’s life redefines humility. A life of humility is not really valued by our world system. In ancient times, it was seen as base, and was associated with failure and shame. Even today humble choices are often mocked and ridiculed as impractical and naïve. Humility is not often a positive choice.. So we must ask ourselves- do we trust this call to humility?

Maybe the question needs to be, do we trust Christ?

Imagine Humility’s Position: Christ’s actions in leaving heaven for earth. We cannot fathom the distance between heaven and earth. The Creator becomes the created one. He lays aside his position, his rank and his privilege to take on human nature.

In so doing, he puts on Humility’s Clothes- the very nature of a servant. His outer actions are congruent with his internal attitudes. Christ became a servant in the first place by joining humankind in our humanity, and then, because of his true humanity, he serves us through his death.³

I think it’s worth reflecting about the fact that prior to his death, Jesus lived out his humility, his servanthood, before the watching world. Remember how he treated the centurion- this Roman

² Peterson, Eugene. (2017). *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* (Kindle Version). (pp. xv-xx).

³ Melick, Richard R., Jr. *The New American Commentary: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*. Broadman & Holman Publishers. 1991.

soldier? With respect and honor. What about how he lifted up the woman caught in adultery? “Neither do I condemn you, Go and sin no more”. To the Samaritan woman at the well he offered living water. The blind and the lame and the lepers crowded around him for healing. A woman touched the hem of his robe and he did not reject her. The little children loved him, because he welcomed them and would not allow them to be sent away from him. His dignity was less important to him than the hearts and spirits of those little ones. There is almost no story of Jesus that does not showcase this quality of his humility.

But the true humiliation of Christ came through death on a cross. The shame of this kind of execution, reserved for the basest of criminals- the very lowest of the low. And this is how our Lord chose to die.

Why? For me. For you. In the service of all humankind. The importance of Jesus Christ coming in the flesh cannot be overstated. His choice to conform his flesh to the pattern of humankind allows our eternal salvation. Halleluiah. What a Savior.

This kind of servanthood is actually beyond any of us. WE can’t achieve this kind of purity of purpose. It is just too difficult. But what we can do, what we must do, is to be willing to seek the mind of Christ. To be willing to take on His attitudes and his clothing of humility, and to treat people as he did. This will be congruent discipleship.

So how do we, as limited as we are, begin this journey?

By lifting up Christ. The Father has already done so. We must do so as well.

When Christ is lifted up, all differences fall away

When Christ is lifted up, all knees bow

When Christ is lifted up, all voices declare that

Jesus Christ is Lord

When Christ is lifted up, the Father is glorified.

For us to retain the pattern of Christ in and through us, we must be all about lifting up Christ. When we become confused on this point, all else becomes confusing.

Let’s look briefly at the two examples Paul gives us of true patterns of Christ: Timothy and Epaphroditus. Paul says of Timothy in verse 20: “I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare.”

There is no one like Timothy!

Like Jesus- like Paul- Timothy’s life is congruent with his faith. Paul showcases Timothy’s genuine concern for people. This is the mark of humility, the mark of Christ! Timothy looks out

for the interests of Jesus- he lifts up Christ as Lord, not seeking his own glory, but glorifying the Father through his devotion to the Son.

Who do you know who shows genuine concern for your welfare? What a rare gift.

I have a good example of a woman like this. The founder and president of *She Is Safe*, Michele Rickett, went with her husband to serve in Africa as a missionary wife over 40 years ago. They had two small girls at the time, and she was content in her role of missionary wife and mother, serving her husband and her family. But something troubled Michele as she observed the community where they lived. She noticed that there were young girls who seemed to do all the work in the homes, caring for the babies, doing heavy chores- working, always working. They never went to school, and they were often beaten or mistreated. Michele began to ask questions about this girls- first in her missionary community and then more broadly in the local churches and community groups. Each time she asked she got the same answer: "that's just how it is here". And her heart broke every time. She cried out to God to do something about these girls, who, as she finally understood, were sold as workers at very young ages to local families. These were slaves, and the whole community seemed willingly blind to the reality of their suffering. As so often is the case, God's answer to Michele's prayer was a call to a particular ministry, and *She Is Safe* was born. Michele's willingness to show genuine concern for others has now led to women and girls suffering in slavery and abuse in the least reached places to be set free, to gain new hope in Christ and to be equipped for a stronger future. Who do you know in your context who shows genuine concern for the welfare of others?

How do you notice those who have needs in your midst?

And Epaphroditus. In verse 25 Paul writes, "I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to me." This tenderhearted disciple. Truly, I wept when I reflected on the beauty of his story. Sent with love to Paul, in prison, by the church Paul loved and rejoiced over- one of the children of the church, one of the men of the church. They sent one of their best to show their care of Paul. Yes, they sent money- but they also sent their son. And then he almost died!

I am sure that those of you who have children have prayed that their faith would not fail, that they would be true servants of Christ now and throughout their lives. In fact, some of you probably have children who are serving Him in difficult places right now. It's a Christian parent's dream, right? But then they go... and then they suffer.

This is true partnership in the Gospel. I have seen this here in the MENA region- churches sending not only financial resources to each other, but their very best people- Egyptians serving in Iraq and Syria and Lebanon- across North Africa, in Yemen and the Gulf. The Middle Eastern church is a serving church. When this happens, Christ is lifted up.

But what about in times of chaos and disagreement? In our responses to political upheaval and corruption in our governments are we living congruent lives, patterned after our Lord Jesus Christ? Do we reflect Christ as we protest? Do we reflect Christ as we pray? Do we reflect Christ as we disagree about how to respond? Can the watching world see and experience the humility of Christ in us as we attempt to show genuine concern for the welfare of others and live lives of sacrificial service? Are our lives both in and outside of the Churches we serve congruent, or do they reveal a dissonance between belief and action?

Let's reflect upon ways we can truly honor one another, looking out for each other's welfare. Can our churches support and work together to relieve suffering and sorrow? Can we be clear voices of humility, reflecting the mindset of Christ's humility? Can we, together, lift up Christ and focus on Him, to the glory of God the Father?

I want to leave you with the conclusion to Eugene Peterson's story. He describes the ways his life and ministry were transformed as he learned how to truly pastor his church. He says this:

“one of the unintended consequences was that I was beginning to treat my congregation with far more dignity than I had been treating them. Impatience began to diminish; condescension slowly faded out. I was learning to embrace the congregation just as they were, not how I wanted them to be. Relationships grew deeper and reached further into the broader community. I began to weed out the de-personalizing stereotypes that identified the souls in my care as either problems to be fixed or resources to be exploited. Our congregation was not a collection of individuals, but something more like a body with distinctive parts, but all the parts working organically with Christ as the head.”⁴

It is Christ who works in and through us. He has called us, and he will do it. Halleluiah, Amen.

⁴ Peterson, Eugene. (2017). *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* (Kindle Version). (pp. xv-xx).