

## **Message: The Biggest Loser Philippians 2:3-11**

If I were to go out on the streets today and ask people to name one of the most successful Americans they can think of, what are some of the names that people would say? (Take suggestions.) I think all of those names would be mentioned. Those are all people who have reached "significant heights," people who have climbed the ladder of success and gotten at or near the top. The names most commonly mentioned may well be Barak Obama and Bill Gates.

Why Bill Gates? Probably because he is the wealthiest person on the planet. It was his ambition to be a millionaire by age 30. He did slightly better than that, and even though he lost about 18 billion in the recent economic downturn, he still manages to be worth about 40 billion dollars. His ambition has since shifted, and this is reflected in the commencement address he gave at Harvard in 2008. I want to read a few of the initial thoughts he shared:

*I've been waiting more than 30 years to say this: "Dad, I always told you I'd come back and get my degree." I want to thank Harvard for this timely honor. I'll be changing my job next year ... and it will be nice to finally have a college degree on my résumé. I applaud the graduates today for taking a much more direct route to your degrees. For my part, I'm just happy that the Crimson has called me "Harvard's most successful dropout." I guess that makes me valedictorian of my own special class ... I did the best of everyone who failed. But I also want to be recognized as the guy who got [Steve Ballmer](#) to drop out of business school. I'm a bad influence. That's why I was invited to speak at your graduation. If I had spoken at your orientation, fewer of you might be here today.... One of my biggest memories of Harvard came in January 1975, when I made a call from Currier House to a company in Albuquerque that had begun making the world's first personal computers. I offered to sell them software. I worried that they would realize I was just a student in a dorm and hang up on me. Instead they said: "We're not quite ready, come see us in a month," which was a good thing, because we hadn't written the software yet. From that moment, I worked day and night on this little extra credit project that marked the end of my college education and the beginning of a remarkable journey with Microsoft. What I remember above all about Harvard was being in the midst of so much energy and intelligence. It could be exhilarating, intimidating, sometimes even discouraging, but always challenging. It was an amazing privilege – and though I left early, I was transformed by my years at Harvard, the friendships I made, and the ideas I worked on. But taking a serious look back ... I do have one big regret. I left Harvard with no real awareness of the awful inequities in the world – the appalling disparities of health, and wealth, and opportunity that condemn millions of people to lives of despair. I learned a lot here at Harvard about new ideas in economics and politics. I got great exposure to the advances being made in the sciences. But humanity's greatest advances are not in its discoveries – but in how those discoveries are applied to reduce inequity. Whether through democracy, strong public education, quality health care, or broad economic opportunity – reducing inequity is the highest human achievement."*

Through the rest of his address, Bill then outlines what has become his new ambition: to eradicate worldwide inequity. So, let me ask you a question: Is ambition a good thing or is it a bad thing? Is climbing the ladder of success a dangerous thing or a healthy thing? I want to take you to a section of the Bible where that question is answered in a unique way. The section of the Bible is called "Philippians," and we been examining God's wisdom there for several weeks. Here God brings up this very word "ambition."

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! <sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (The Bible, Philippians 2:3-11, NIV)*

Let me summarize in a sentence or two what I believe he's saying, and then we'll take some time to unpack his thoughts. There is nothing wrong with climbing the ladder of success as long as you are stepping in the right direction! Ambition is not wrong if it is the pursuit of the right thing in the right way.

"Ambition," as we use the term, is almost always associated with moving me higher. Consider the dictionary.com definition of ambition: Define ambition: "an earnest desire for some type of achievement or distinction, as power, honor, fame, or wealth, and the willingness to strive for its attainment" (Dictionary.com) The basic definition is "an earnest desire for some type of achievement or distinction," but then they list the examples of what we most often have ambition for: power, honor, fame, and wealth.

Ambition, as we tend to see it, is reaching and grasping higher for greater authority, greater prestige, greater pay, greater influence. More for me! We talk about "climbing the ladder to success." We don't talk about descending the ladder. "Success" or "winning" is moving up. Jesus, however, went the other direction. "Less for me means more for others." This passage describes just how far down the ladder of success that Jesus took. He ended up at the bottom of the ladder, not the top. But in the process, he raised others to the top. He did the reverse of what we are used to.

In looking at this section of Philippians, I am going to start at the end and move back. I am going to go in reverse. We are told first to follow the example of Jesus, and then we are told what he did. I think we need to look first at what he did. It will be clearer, then, how we should imitate him. I'll use the ladder here to describe just how far DOWN the ladder Jesus descended.

First, let's look at where Jesus "started." He started at the top rung, the highest place in the universe. Paul notes that Jesus was, in his very nature or essence, **God**. This is the consistent teaching of the Bible. Jesus was the Creator of the Universe. He is the Owner. He holds the universe together, and He is its rightful Ruler. Jesus was God. Jesus is God. Think of all that "comes with" being God. There is prestige, and power, and wealth, and influence, and honor, and awe, and control. Who would want to "step down" from that? That's exactly what Jesus did, however.

He stepped down the ladder. Paul says that he took on the very nature or essence of humanity. He became **human**, the next rung down the ladder. The miracle and mystery is that he did not stop being God. He became, jointly, God and man. He would now be seen as an ordinary and weak and limited human. He, in fact, did choose to limit Himself in becoming a human. Paul uses two vivid phrases to describe this "stepping down." The first is this: "He made himself nothing" or more literally, he "emptied himself." He willingly surrendered his prerogatives, his "freedoms" as God, the "perks" as it were, of being God. He would choose to limit his control and come to earth as an infant. He would choose to limit his power, becoming one who would grow tired and hungry. He would choose to limit his knowledge, becoming one who would study and learn. He would "empty himself," in one sense of wealth, and power, and control, and prestige. He would choose to "release" them.

In all of this, Jesus would appear to be anything but God. This leads us to the next vivid description of Jesus' step down: He "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." If Jesus takes this step down, He will look more human than deity. His choice to "empty himself" will make Him look weak and poor and helpless and foolish. He will not look like an equal with God, the Father, but still Jesus steps down the ladder. He did not grasp after power. He did not grasp after prestige. He did not grasp after reputation. He did not grasp after wealth and ownership. Instead, he "emptied himself." He simply let that stuff go, and stepped DOWN the ladder of "success." This, however, was not the last step down.

The next step down is this. Jesus became a **servant**. He did not simply take a step down to becoming human. As a man, he came as a servant. In his book, The Jesus I Never Knew, Philip Yancey captures something of this. He writes:

"In London, looking toward the auditorium's royal box where the queen and her family sat, I caught glimpses of the...way rulers stride through the world: with bodyguards, and a trumpet fanfare and a flourish of bright clothes and flashing jewelry. Queen Elizabeth II had recently visited the United States, and reporters delighted in spelling out the logistics involved: her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, forty pints of plasma, and white kid-leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost twenty million dollars. In meek contrast, God's visit to earth took place in an animal shelter with no attendants present and nowhere to lay the newborn king but a feed trough. Indeed, the event

that divided history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal than human witnesses. A mule could have stepped on him." (*Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew, Zondervan, 1995*)

He was born very poor. He did not grasp at wealth. The dominant ruling nation of the day was Rome, but Jesus was not born a Roman. He was born a Jew, and the Jews were servants of Rome. The Jewish nation had been conquered by Rome. Jesus' father was a blue-collar carpenter trying to make ends meet. Jesus stepped down the ladder to become a poor carpenter in a dominated country in an insignificant corner of the world. But he stepped down another rung yet.

Paul writes that Jesus lived out **obedience**. The Creator and Ruler of the universe was obedient. He was obedient to parents and teachers. He was obedient to government authorities, even when they convicted him in an unjust courtroom and even when they sentenced him to death. He was obedient. Understand, however, that God has always been obedient. In the mystery of one God in three persons (Father, Son, and Spirit) the Son chooses to obey the Father. It is not that Jesus doesn't share the heart of the father. It is just that the Son is willing to humble himself to be obedient. By the way, God is deeply humble, the source of any humility in any person in our world.

In his humility, the son verbalizes his submission to God, the Father. The night before he is to die a death whose pain we will never fully understand, he talks to the Father, saying "if it is possible, may this cup (of death) be taken from me, yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39 NIV) He surrenders Himself to the Father's wisdom and care. He is obedient to death, which leads us to the next rung DOWN the ladder to which Jesus stepped.

He stepped down to **death**. Death is the ultimate reminder that we are powerless to control life. Michael Jackson, for all his popularity and wealth and influence, could not stop death. The one are of control that virtually everyone wants is the ability to stop death. I read of one dying millionaire who said he'd trade it all for one more year. Obviously, that's not how it works. When Jesus chose to become a human, he became "kill-able." He took on the ultimate limitation of humans--that they die.

In doing so, He looked powerless. He looked like anything but God. This is a depth of "emptying" or letting go that I cannot fathom. Dying on a cross, He looked foolish and powerless. That is why someone viewing his death, mocked Him out loud with the words: "He saved others, but he can't save himself." I've said it before. If I were Jesus in that moment, it all goes up in smoke. I hate looking weak and powerless. I would have had to show them all I was God. But Jesus did not grasp after power and control. Instead, He emptied Himself even more. He "lost" even more. In dying, he looked like the "biggest loser." You might think, then, that death was in fact the lowest rung to which Jesus stepped. It was not.

Paul reminds us that the lowest rung of the ladder was not death; It was **death on a cross**. We have little idea the weight of this. In our day, a cross is a sign of

honor or care or respect. Those who give their lives in military battle are awarded a "purple cross." Cemeteries are full of crosses. Crosses are on the trucks of relief organizations and many of you are wearing a cross around your neck this morning. Crosses are special in America. Not so in Rome in Jesus' day.

F.F. Bruce explains: "In polite Roman society the word "cross" was an obscenity, not to be uttered in conversation." Even when a man was being sentenced to death by crucifixion, an archaic formula was used that avoided the pronouncing of this four-letter word..." Bruce quotes Cicero as saying "the very word 'cross,' should be foreign not only to the body of a Roman citizen, but to his thoughts, his eyes, his ears."

It was humbling enough that Jesus died, but the kind of death he died was more humbling still. He died as a convicted criminal. He was viewed as a criminal. But there is something far deeper here. He "became sin" for us. It is difficult to grasp the concept, much less the anguish of such a thing. In some way, our broken thoughts and choices, the "smallest" offenses along with the most shameful decisions we've ever made were "attached" to Him: serial killer, rapist, molester, pimp, drug pusher, pedophile, wife-beater, bigot, cheater, traitor, liar, racist. In some sense, he "became" those things. Our pride, our gossip, our selfishness, our lust, our selfishness, our insensitivity, our hateful words became His. Jesus emptied himself of His reputation.

As such, Jesus was "the biggest loser." Does it bother you for me to call Jesus a "loser?" If so, you may be on the edge of grasping what true humility is. You may be close to understanding what God is calling us to. Before I talk about imitating Jesus' humility, let me remind you of what God the Father did when Jesus reached the bottom rung of the ladder.

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11, NIV)*

When Jesus humbled Himself, God lifted Him up. The reality is this. In humbling Himself as no human had ever done, Jesus revealed His true glory as God. The depth of his humility revealed the extent of His glory. Jesus humbled Himself, entrusting God with the outcome. God, the Father, in His humility, puts Jesus in the place of highest glory. Jesus is Lord, the One before Whom every person on who has ever lived must submit and acknowledge. After Jesus humbled Himself, the Father highlighted the Son's rightful place of glory. This is what God does. The Bible reminds us, in James 4:10, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." (James 4:10, NIV)

We are called to imitate the humility of Jesus: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." To help us imitate him, I wish I could give a human picture of

the loss that Jesus took. No picture can accurately capture how Jesus lowered Himself, but I will try one that may give us a glimpse. I want you to imagine that you are Bill Gates. Worth 40 billion dollars, you are the wealthiest person in the world. When you talk, people listen. When you act, it makes the news. When you tell a joke, people laugh. When you give, people applaud. When you want something, you get it.

So, what if you decided to "take on" the appearance and life of a homeless man for one month? No credit card, no cash, no cell phone, no bodyguard, no photo i.d.-- nothing! No announcement to the media. You end up living in a cardboard box in a crime-ridden corner of Manila in the Philippines. (Of course, to complete the picture, you would have to be falsely accused of molesting and killing a Filipino, convicted, and executed before a firing squad.)

Here is my question: Would you ever even remotely consider doing such a thing? What could ever motivate you to give up prestige, power, reputation, wealth, and your very life? So, why did Jesus become the biggest loser? You will never understand why he climbed so far DOWN the ladder until you understand His ambition. His ambition was to rescue every person who has ever lived. You see this repeatedly in the words he spoke, like these: "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (The Bible, John 10:11, NIV) "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (The Bible, John 15:13, NIV) Paul, in another part of the Bible, puts it this way: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty, might become rich." He did it for others. He did it for us.

Understand this. If Jesus does not become "the biggest loser," we all lose. We are doomed. What Jesus did provided the only hope we had to be forgiven and restored and free. Jesus' primary ambition, in His own words was to "seek and save those who are lost." The sole reason Jesus stepped down the ladder of success was because of his ambition to save sinners like us. His ambition was to help others, not Himself.

He calls us to do the exact same thing, to go as low as we need to go in order to benefit someone else. Ambition is not a bad thing; It's a healthy thing. Paul Himself had ambition: "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known" (Romans 15:20) Ambition is good if it's aimed in the right direction. Ambition aimed at getting me more wealth, more power, more control, more fame for my glory is misdirected and, frankly, unsatisfying.

God calls us to move in a different direction. Stop grasping for personal power and control and wealth and reputation. Instead, look for where you can "give up" to benefit others. Learn to empty yourself. Learn to empty yourself, giving praise away to others. In 1994, running back, Thurman Thomas, sat dejectedly on a bench after another Super Bowl loss in which he ran poorly and cost his team points with fumbles. Dallas had beaten Buffalo through the outstanding running of Emmitt Smith, who was named MVP of Super Bowl XXVIII. Looking up from the bench, Thomas saw Emmitt Smith standing there with his goddaughter. Smith got his

Goddaughter's attention and pointed to Thurman Thomas and said: "I want you to meet the greatest running back in the NFL, Mr. Thurman Thomas." Emmitt Smith emptied himself of the praise we tend to grasp for.

Learn to "empty yourself" by submitting to others. Do you resist taking instruction or orders from others? I know it's not fun...or easy. There is always a tension in me when I'm told I must do something. A part of that tension for me is placing myself "under" someone else--his wisdom, her authority. It is vital for me and for us to resist grasping for authority and to submit to others.

Learn to give up control. A couple of weeks ago, my wife was picking me up in the car. As soon as she pulled up, she got out of the driver's seat and went to the passenger side. She said: "I knew you'd want to drive." She was right. If I'm in a car, I want to be the driver. I do enjoy driving, but a part of that is tied to control. I can go the route I think is best. I can go at the speed I want to go. I realized it is one of several areas where I grasp for control. There are times when I need to release control to others, for their good...and for my own.

Learn to let go of looking strong or impressive or smart. The only way Jesus could save us was through looking foolish and weak and unrespectable. Sometimes, the good of another person will hinge on us letting go of our reputation or desire to look strong. Jackie Robinson was approached by Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager, Branch Rickey and asked to try out for their team. If he made the team, he would be the first black player to play in the major leagues. Rickey warned Robinson that he would be insulted, thrown at, spiked, and worse. Robinson asks: "Mr. Rickey, do you want a player who's afraid to fight back? Rickey countered, "I want a player with guts enough not to fight back. You've got to do the job with base hits, stolen bases, and fielding ground balls." In other words, let go of fighting for your reputation, which is exactly what Robinson did.

Robinson, however, remembers a moment when a teammate let go of his own reputation for Jackie. In one particular home game in Brooklyn, Robinson had an error, and the home fans began to jeer him. He stood near second base, wilting under the merciless ridicule until shortstop, Pee Wee Reese came, stood next to him, and put his arm around Jackie's shoulder. The tone of the crowd changed, and I've read that Robinson credits that one act with saving his career.

We are called to do what Pee Wee Reese did, to put our own reputations at risk to win something for someone else. Build your ambition around blessing others even if it means losses for you. We have the challenge from God. We have the example of Jesus to follow. Will we now have the courage to follow through?