



Philippians 2:5-11
Character and Reputation
Jesus' Character and Reputation

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Today we continue the series we started last week on Character and Reputation. Last week's message was kind of an overview and introduction to the topic, including looking at several Bible passages that speak to the topic at hand. And of course, we will keep looking at more as we go along through the series, including today's passage and others we'll look at. Let's turn to Philippians 2:5-11...

This morning we are going to look at the character and reputation of Jesus. This is an important place for us to start as Jesus followers, because, well...because we're Jesus followers. Jesus is the one who sets the bar for what it means to be human; he sets the bar for what it means to be Godly; he sets the bar for what it means to love, to forgive, to tell the truth, to show compassion....there is so much in regards to character for which Jesus sets the bar. As Jesus' followers and as a part of the body of Christ, He is our model, and our character then reflects on Jesus.

If we are to even come close to agreeing with Paul's statement in Galatians 2:20, "**I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me**" (Galatians 2:20). ...if we're even going to even be in the *same ballpark* as that statement with our own lives, then we've got to understand Jesus' character and what his reputation was when he walked the face of the earth. One of those two is straightforward, while the other is more complex, and we'll see why today.

Let's start with Jesus' character. Today's passage from Philippians really opens the door to understanding Jesus' character. It's like the tip of the iceberg in some ways, but it also pretty well encapsulates all the other character traits of Jesus.

To begin with, we see that: **Jesus had the character of a servant.** Verse 7, in particular, makes this point clear, and we see it throughout Jesus' life as he ministered to people in a variety of ways. But Paul is also getting at something utterly foundation about Jesus and his servant nature: That in

becoming a man, Jesus took the posture of a servant. Not just in what he did when he walked the face of the earth, but in who he was when he became human. He completely emptied himself of what he was. Jesus was God, and he became a human being.

The older members of our family (Gwen, me, and our three oldest kids) have recently been watching the Netflix show, “The Crown.” It’s about Queen Elizabeth becoming queen of England and the challenges - personal and political - that come with that.¹ Although the fourth season of the show is about to begin, we are newbies, and so we’re about half way through the first season. Though it’s not a documentary, it also is not a work of fiction. It would probably rightly be called “dramatized history” or “historical fiction.”

And one of the themes highlighted soon after Elizabeth becomes queen is her desire to still be “herself.” Some of this is brought out by her husband who has his frustrations with the expectations thrust upon them, but clearly she also doesn’t always want to do things the way they always have been done by previous Kings and Queens. For instance, she wants to live somewhere other than the palace; she wants to be known by her husband’s last name and not her family name. In a nutshell, she wants to put a little more emphasis on her as Elizabeth, and a little less on her as Queen. But ultimately, she gives in, and realizes that she has to set aside much of her own desires in order to fulfill her duty as the Queen of England.

For Jesus, rather than ascending to the royal throne, he’s descending from it. So that’s one significant difference in this analogy. But otherwise, there are similarities. Jesus gave up his “natural self” – his royal position in eternity, to come and serve humanity. He also had to set aside much of his own human desires (he was tempted, for example, but didn’t give in) in order to fulfill his duty. Why did he do this?

With even just a cursory reading of the biographies of Jesus (known as the Gospels) there can be no doubt Jesus did this because of love and

¹ Just FYI if you want to watch any episodes: The show occasionally has some quite “adult content” though it’s always very brief - and not in every episode (we’ve watched 8 or so thus far).

faithfulness. We looked at those character traits last week and how they are central to who God is. And in today's passage we see some other facets of Jesus' character: He doesn't use what he has for his own benefit, but for others; he serves; He is humble; and he is obedient – even to the point of death on the cross.

Not all of these character traits are highly sought after or valued in the world. Putting others first? Not lifted up real high. Serving others? It's valued as long as others are doing the serving. Being humble? Sometimes people will credit others...but a lot of people want all the glory for successes, and they want others to take the blame for failures and mistakes; some people think obedience is great as long as they're the ones calling the shots and its other people who are obedient.

But when these character traits are rooted in love and faithfulness for others, then we start to see them in a more positive light. After last week's message, someone emailed me the next day with a suggestion that I take a look at an essay – which was originally given as a sermon – by C.S. Lewis, titled, “The Weight of Glory.” He preached it in June of 1942. He begins by saying this, “If you asked twenty good men to-day what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. But if you asked almost any of the great Christians of old he would have replied, Love. You see what has happened? **A negative term has been substituted for a positive...The negative ideal of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point**” (C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory”).

What Lewis is saying is that this character trait of unselfishness - which connects with several of these we see in this Philippians passage that describe Jesus such as humility and serving and obedience - this kind of character trait sounds like a “negative” thing to us (we're giving something up, making a sacrifice), which makes us not want to engage in it. **But for Jesus, these kinds of traits are all rooted in love: Love for His heavenly father and love for his neighbor.**

So Jesus really takes these character traits and turns them on their head from how we tend to think of them: that they're not negative things because we are going "without" something; they're positives rooted in love - and Lewis goes on to add that good things come from this for us, too: joy, fulfillment, abundant life, and ultimately, life eternal. It's not all sacrifice with no personal reward. But that's the high kind of character that Jesus had.

Given His high character, what was Jesus' reputation? What did this service and humble position and obedience and putting others first all lead to as far as the widely held perception of him? Before we look at some verses and passages, let me just preface it by saying that there's probably two ways to answer that question. First, several billion people around the world today cling to the name of Jesus and revere him as Lord of lords and King of Kings. That's a pretty good indication of the reputation that began even as Jesus ministered to and taught people. But, Jesus was sentenced to death on a cross because some other people thought he was on par with criminals. That's not a very good reputation at all.

Let's look at a few verses that show these two differing reputations. Luke gives us a great verse that summarizes Jesus' growing up years that sheds much light on this. Luke 2:52 says, "**And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and people**" (Luke 2:52). We see that Jesus grew in favor with God and people. Jesus' reputation grew not only with God his heavenly Father, but also with people; he had favor with them, he had a good name. So that's the beginning of his good reputation spreading.

And then we see the effects of Jesus' reputation growing as people come to him to be healed, as they look to him for wisdom and spiritual insight, and Godly teaching, and so forth. His reputation is really positive with a large chunk of the population because of his character - his love, faithfulness, servant's heart, humble nature, and so forth. Ultimately, this is the reputation that wins the day, over the centuries. Jesus' reputation is partly why we're gathered here in church or watching online. Obviously, the resurrection is the biggest reason - it backs up his teaching and gives meaning to the cross...but if Jesus had had poor character and poor reputation, we probably wouldn't be

inclined to then believe the resurrection accounts. It would discredit everything. So that's His good reputation that spread.

But: Jesus' good reputation was not the only one about him circulating in the day. For instance, in Luke 5:29-34 read this: "Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' Jesus answered them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'

They said to him, 'John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.' Jesus answered, 'Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast'" (Luke 5:29-34).

The first accusation is about the people Jesus and his disciples hung out with: tax collectors and sinners; while the second thing said about him and his disciples is that they aren't fasting from eating and drinking. They (and Jesus) aren't doing what good religious people are supposed to do, in other words. So Jesus' reputation in certain circles is starting to be a little dubious. We see this continue later in Luke 7 with this teaching from Jesus: "**For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by all her children"** (Jesus, in Luke 7:33-35). You can't please all the people all the time, right? John is at one end of the spectrum, and Jesus is at the other, and both get criticized.

So Jesus' reputation continues to be not so great in certain circles. This doesn't mean Jesus and his disciples actually were gluttons and drunkards. Certainly nothing in the gospels indicates this. Notice that Jesus doesn't spend much time debating them, though. His only comment on it is that the truth of his character, and that of his disciples, will win the day ("wisdom is

proved right by her children”). In other words, it will all come to light and be evident based on the fruit of his ministry, and he’s confident that the fruit of his life and ministry is good, even if his reputation isn’t always good.

Lastly, we all know that Jesus ultimately was crucified. No one gets sentenced to death like that because of a good reputation. His reputation among some people - yes, the minority, but a powerful, vocal, and insistent minority - his reputation among them led them to bring religious charges against him, such as blasphemy, breaking religious laws, and so forth. Some of them are articulated in the last couple Bible passages. And while a death sentence might seem extreme to us for these things, it wasn’t for them.

So Jesus’ reputation was mixed, really. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis: a bad reputation was substituted for a positive one. But this should come as no surprise. People will see what they want to see. They’ll hear what they want to hear. They’ll interpret things how they want to interpret them. It happened then and it still happens today. Remember the dress that got so much attention a few years ago where some people saw a black and blue dress, and other people, looking at the exact same photograph, saw a white and gold one? **(Picture)**. (What do you see?) People were having fights at the dinner table over this - it was almost as bad as trying to discuss politics at Thanksgiving....our own family was divided over what the dress looked like... Back to the point: The same thing happened to Jesus, and it still does. People will see different things in us, form their opinions, share those thoughts with others and soon there’s a reputation that begins to get built.



If it happened to Jesus, it can happen to us. **Jesus shows us that the thing to focus on is our character.** And when we are the ones observing others, we must be careful about our own perceptions of them and the reputation we ascribe to them. It behooves us to make sure we’re looking beyond the surface to the deeper motives and reasons. We have to look at a person’s character. Each of us can not only be the victim of a wrong reputation, but we can also be the ones who perpetuate an undeserved reputation.

Regardless: **Jesus didn't let his reputation change or sway him. He stayed true to God's call upon his life and stayed focused on living with high character.** And part of that was to spend time with people who were broken, hurting, and caught up in sin - the very reasons some people gave him a bad reputation. Jesus' character and mission gave him the foundation and the strength to meet those people in their places of need: His servant's heart, his obedience to His Father and to His mission, His humble nature, and so much more.

And it's his high character, really, that led him all the way to the cross. Everything this Philippians passage says about him...as well as his love and his faithfulness...and more...led him to the cross...which led to his resurrection on the third day. And the final reputation, that's built on Jesus' character and who he is...that's built on the truth of Jesus himself...is given to us by Paul: **The final reputation is: "...that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:11).** And it's not just a reputation, it's the truth of who Jesus is, built on his character. 2,000 years later, it still wins the day.

I pray we each know this truth about Jesus in our own lives, and acknowledge him as Lord and Savior. May we each recognize him as God come to us in the flesh...stepping right out of eternity to spend time with sinners like you and me, to meet us in our places of need, show us the way, and even *be* the way to joyful, abundant life and life eternal. Let's pray...Amen.