

Philippians 2:1 – 17
April 4, 2004
Robert Hunt

Being like Jesus, not like the gods, makes us shine like stars.

I. Introduction

When the ancients looked to the sky they didn't just see stars. They saw what we call the constellations – groups of stars named for gods and heroes. And their myths told them that some of these were gods who had become stars. Well, we call our celebrated people "stars" as well - shining personalities. But do they really bring light in a dark world?

The Philippians lived in a world where many people wanted their lives to shine. Indeed they believed that the highest achievement of human life was to be a god. And in Greek mythology it could happen, right? With a little luck you might be taken into the ranks of the gods. Such beliefs, and desires, are part of our world today. We want to be stars, to shine and gain acclamation from the world. We want to find and promote the divine spark within us until it blazes into a god-like fire. But is that what the world really needs? Does that really fulfill our human destiny?

Paul writes to the Philippians with a different vision of both humanity and divinity. He tells them that the way to shine like stars is to serve like Jesus served. The way to find God is to love your fellow human beings. As we look at this more closely, let us go to God in prayer.

Prayer: "Lord, show us how to shine as stars in a dark world, but with a light that comes from Christ in our hearts. In his name we pray. Amen."

II. Being a god.

In the Greek cultural world of the Philippians the gods were nothing like the one God of the Jews. The gods were powerful, but not all powerful. They were beautiful and radiant to see, but often ugly in their actions. Most of all, they were served by humans, they did not serve anybody, least of all each other. For those who didn't believe in such gods there was only the idea of a kind of infinitely distant Divine substance, which existed perfect, unchanging, and uncaring about the world.

Still, mere humans wanted to be like gods, to have the power and immortality of the gods, to shine like gods. They were so different from you and me. But how can we lift ourselves up? How can we be like a god?

1. Power –

They believed that power was one thing every god needed. If you want to be a god you must get and hold onto power. It was power that allowed the Olympian gods to triumph over the earlier Titans, and it was power that allowed some humans to rise above other humans. A person with enough power to be a king was actually a kind of god/man. And the Greeks understood some kinds of power as well as we do. People with political power were practically gods since they could impose their will on others. Money was power. The golden rule was "she who has the gold, rules." And the ancient Greeks often sought spiritual power, mastery of invisible forces, even magic. Everyone knew that gods had charisma, and could enchant others and make them do their will.

People in our world are not so different. We may start by believing that with power we can help other people. God-like we want to distribute our favors among others. But eventually we want the real rewards of god-like power. We want to be immune from obeying the laws of mere mortals.

And we see this in our world. A CEO with enough money can confound justice forever, no matter how many people have been ripped off. A politician can vote herself immune from prosecution. The rich can live in a country that values their riches more than what is right. This kind of thing may disgust us, and

yet often these powerful people do shine like gods! At least on the pages of the magazines and newspapers. The scum of the earth are the center of attention – and many of us want that as well. We want the power to shine like they shine.

2. Prestige and worship

And there you have the second thing attractive about being a god – people worship you. They put your picture on the cover of magazines. Boys hang it on their walls. Girls stick it in their locker at school. People stand back respectfully when you go by, or they mob you with adulation.

Of course some folks carry the god thing to extremes. Imelda Marcos actually had a chapel built for people to worship her image. Vladimir Putin appears to be having icons of himself made so people can hang them in orthodox churches and his picture for a blessing. Many of us are more modest. We just want our family and friends to worship us. Of course in a society still influenced by Christianity worship is too strong a word. So often we talk about “prestige” instead. We want to have prestige, or prestigious cars, jewelry, vacations, houses, meals. People with *prestige* are looked up to, and of course that is a form of worship. And that makes us like gods, doesn’t it?

But it is worth thinking about the roots of that word prestige. It comes from the middle French, (I looked that up on my prestigious Palm Tungsten while I had a double latte in an expensive coffee shop on the Graben.) The root word of prestige means a conjuror’s trick. In fact it is related to the English work prestidigitation – or magic. Prestige is a way of pulling the wool over someone’s eyes, deceiving them into believing you are more than you are. If you wrap yourself in prestige; with the right car, clothes, political office, jewels, or whatever, and you draw the admiration and worship of the world. But although you may think you are a god, and they may think you are a god, you are still a human being.

3. To be served.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of gods is that they are served. They never lack someone to bring them food and drink, to entertain them, to help them with their hair and clothes. Greek gods didn’t serve, they were served. And this continues until today. All the little gods in our world, the politicians, movie stars, celebrities, want to be served. They live in an amoral world in which the pursuit of self-indulgence dictates virtually every action.

A recent book (*For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* by Rodney Stark) has research on a number of different religions. One of the key points in the book is that polytheistic religions usually have no moral dimension. Their gods care only for themselves, not for humans, and what people learn from that is selfishness. But in a way that is an old story. Socrates was executed because he was accused of “atheism.” He didn’t believe in the Greek gods. And the reason was that he knew these gods only dragged people down morally and intellectually. Better no gods than bad gods.

Well those who strive to be gods, or god-like, also forget about serving others. Being a god is all about being served. And it seems that the brightest lights in the perverse eyes of our world are those surrounded by bodyguards and lackeys and toadying sycophants and groupies. And what their followers learn is selfishness and self-indulgence. True, they do seem to shine. But then it is an awfully dim light that shines only against the darkness of Hollywood and its corporate and political suburbs. Indeed it is no light at all, for it is only the reflection of the flood lights and studio lights of media attention. Without *that* most of our stars would simply wink into darkness

And indeed these lights are so dim that they are no light at all in a dark world. They illuminate nothing, teach nothing, and do nothing to make our lives better or bring justice and peace in our torn and wounded world. If People Magazine, Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, Forbes, and all the other peans to aspiring gods disappeared tomorrow the world might not be better, but it wouldn’t be any worse. These

modern gods, like those of ancient Greece, are a burden not a benefit, and atheism is by far a more honorable choice than worshipping them.

III. Another God

Thank God, however, that we have another example to follow. As Paul encourages the Philippians to live in love he tells them to follow the example of Jesus Christ. Paul reminds them of their faith. By faith they see the world around them differently from those who live blinded by their own ambition and darkened in their understanding. The Philippians shouldn't be impressed by celebrities. Nor should they believe that suffering and humility are signs of mere mortality. Paul quotes what would have been a familiar song, or hymn that lays the groundwork for this new Christian worldview, this new understanding of God.

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

Here is no man striving to be a god, but God willing to serve and suffer as a man. The Christ emptied himself of all ambitions to be praised, to have power, or to be served. He deserved all of that and more, and yet he came to serve us. The image of Palm Sunday underscores this. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that "he come humble" to his kingdom. Jesus doesn't wrap himself in robes of silk and wear a golden crown. He isn't surrounded by body guards. He isn't reflecting the photographer's lights. In other words he is the total opposite of what our world calls leadership, celebrity, and even holiness.

And he would become even more humble. He would serve faithfully until the world repaid that service with denigration, humiliation, suffering, and finally death on the cross. That faithful service, as human suffering for humanity, is truly God-like. Why do we strive to be gods, when God has shown God's fullness in humanity?

Listen to what Paul says:

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

Jesus doesn't glorify himself. God glorifies him. He doesn't raise himself up. God lifts him up with love. Jesus doesn't try to become God, but his divinity shines out clear and bright. He wears no crown, but all who see him resurrected will call him king. He demands no service, yet finally every knee will bow to him gladly. He asks no praise, but in the end everyone will confess that he is Lord.

And he is our example. He shows the way to shine in a dark world. Serve with humility, and let God lift you up.

IV. Shining as Stars

What this requires is that we have a kind of conversion experience. Most of us, most of the time, live in that old Greek world where humans must strive to be gods. The day to day life of a normal human being seems to us meaningless compared to the glamour and honor that goes to people with power and prestige

and adulation. There are no awards, and little appreciation, for what most of us do most of the time. We don't get put on magazine covers for doing the laundry, washing the dishes, slogging it out at the office, helping with the homework. No one calls a press conference because we went shopping for groceries, visiting a hurting friend, read the Bible or prayed for someone who was sick. A lot of times we feel that compared to those who we see on TV we live in a kind of shadow-land, invisible to the world, and contributing nothing of lasting value.

Yet this view of the world is false. One of the most interesting things about astronomy – since we are thinking of stars, is how much more has been discovered about our universe since scientists discovered that most of the light in the universe can't be seen with the eyes. Those brilliant pictures from the Hubble telescope show infra-red light, ultraviolet light, radio frequencies, even x-rays. In fact that vast majority of stuff in the universe is dark to our eyes, yet shines brightly in the radio spectrum. Not just most of the stuff in fact, the most important stuff. The stuff whose gravity holds everything together, or maybe makes it fly apart, is “dark” to our eyes.

Too often that is true of our human world as well. We don't see what really matters. Yet the life of Christ has shown us a new way to see our world, and the universe we live in. He has shown us the real world, the world of God's light. In that divine light all those so-called stars, the constellations of celebrities, disappear into the darkness. And what shines out? Those who have served their neighbors, who have looked to the interests of others and not themselves. Those who have loved deeply and magnificently and suffered for it. Those who spent themselves in a thousand small ways so that children can grow happy and free, the old can enjoy the fruit of their labor, and the burden of suffering is lifted from those most in pain. *These are the true stars in our dark world.* They are not gods, but they are sons and daughters of god. Like Jesus Christ they, like Jesus Christ *you*, have glorified God in with humility and service. And with Jesus we will be raised to glory.

“changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.