

The syndrome is called the Messiah Complex. Most of us wrestle with it. Some of us more than others. Thankfully, few of us have it as bad as Leon, Joseph, and Clyde. They're called The Three Christ's of Ypsilanti. Their therapist, Milton Rokeach diagnosed them "with psychotic delusional disorder, grandiose type. Each one maintained he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ" [Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted, p. 97]. Working with them for two years Rokeach couldn't shake their illusions of Cosmic status. He put them in a small group that ate, slept, met & worked together in the same vicinity, hoping their interactions would knock some sense into them. The group therapy met with little success. But their talk sometimes got wild, crazy, and bizarre. "One of the men would claim, 'I'm the Messiah, the Son of God. I am on a mission. I was sent here to save the earth.' 'How do you know?' Rokeach would ask. 'God told me.' And one of the other patients would counter, 'I never told you any such thing.'" Here are the three stooges—Larry, Moe, and Curly jostling with one another over their place in the Trinity. Reading stuff like this Ortberg admits, "we don't know whether to laugh or cry" [Ibid, p. 98]

The garden variety Messiah Complex tends to grow in our own lowa backyard. It sneaks up on us subconsciously. There's practical atheism. But sometimes we function as an omniscient God in the flesh.

- **We over commit.** Too many late night/early morning meetings. Too many nights out in the field. Too many speaking engagements. Too many people draining the juice right out of us. Too little rest. Not enough refreshment and relaxation.
- **We get undernourished.** I once entered the home place of a MN farmer in one of my congregations. I was amazed that that a steel tank high in the air had begun to collapse. I asked him why. "That's easy," he said. "If the pressure outside the tank isn't matched by sufficient pressure inside the tank, the tank will collapse." The more pressure builds outside us, less sustenance within and our system begins to collapse. We begin to feel like a human doing and not a human being.
- **We buy into illusions of indispensability, invincibility, omniscience.** Our school, our church, our families, our business—all we've worked for will self-destruct without us. We become fixers. We unconsciously think that we are some kind of Reformed Zorro, who can ride into town usher in a New Reformation almost single-handedly by our skilled thrusts with the Sword of the Spirit.

I don't know anyone here who claims to be a Messiah. But some of you are so multi-talented, so skilled, so gifted, so driven, so compassionate so very good at what you do that there are times you are running on empty. We don't really believe this. We don't believe we're Messiahs. We just act that way. We're functional Messiahs. Consider the church at Philippi.

Some of the Christians at Philippi struggled with this functional messiahship, in particular two staff members. We read about them in chapter 4. Euodia and Syntyche had lost the art of get along-ability. Relational war had broken out between them. They were at one another's throats. So bitter was the conflict that Paul had to gently nail them in a letter to be publicly read in the church. He said, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord" [4:2]. In chapter 2 Paul urges the Church to tap into the power of the risen Christ, to lay aside personal agendas, selfish rivalry, and vain conceit and

consider others interests above our own. We are then given a vision to overcome our functional Messiah complex. It's the drama of Christmas and the Cross. We must ascend the down staircase. It's this simple. The only way up is down.

I. TOP STEP: GLORY. Imagine with me, throw up on the screen of your mind right now a descending staircase. On the top staircase stands the pre-existent Son of God, the Lord Jesus before His birth. Verse 6 describes Him in that position. "Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped...." The word highlighted, being, is a circumstantial participle. You translate it best by grasping the context—"the circumstances' surrounding it" [p. 104]. Sometimes vs. 6 is translated concessively. "Who, despite the fact....that he was in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped...." That's how we normally think about God. If anyone in the universe has reason to be cocky at all, it's God. The universe is His oyster. "Pride is forbidden to human beings, but it's okay in God because, after all he is God" [p. 106]. Well, despite that fact, the Son of God humbled Himself and became one of us.

Scholar Gerald Hawthorne argues that the best translation of this participle is not concessive but causative. And once you get a hold of this, it will absolutely blow your mind! "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; who—precisely because he was in very nature God—did not use his equality as a springboard, as a catapult to further glory, as a means to step up the staircase" [p.105, cf. Word Biblical Commentary #43 Gerald Hawthorne@2:5.p.85]. At His very core, Yahweh is a humble servant. In fact, there is no one in the universe as humble as God! He is not self-centered, but other centered. Precisely because He is a Servant God [not King Tut], the pre-incarnate Christ took the very nature of a servant.

II. STEP TWO: ENFLESHMENT. If on Step One—we visualize the Son of God's Pre-birth glory, the next step down, the next phase of His suffering, was for the Son of God to assume flesh and blood, like you and me, to become fully human. This is the miracle of Christmas, the enfleshment of God. With Christ we have a hybrid person [like my gas and electric Prius]. Jesus is 100% God & 100% man, the only 200% personality ever to walk this planet. We read about the incarnation in vv. 7-8 "But made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man...." Jesus went from heavenly riches to earthly rags. The word translated likeness at the end of vs. 7 [schema] was used of a king who exchanges his robe of royalty for sackcloth. At one instant the Son was the Sovereign King and Creator receiving the praises of angels and the very next instant he became a fetus in the belly of a poor common maiden girl, 13 year old Mary.

III. STEP THREE: THE CROSS. The final Step, the bottom step, Philippians 2 speaks of, leads Christ to the excruciating pain, loneliness, and alienation of the Cross. Listen to vs. 8 "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death even death on a cross!" On the cross, Jesus Christ, the suffering servant became our Sin-bearer and in one dark moment in history, the Father poured out His wrath against the sin of the whole human race. In our place Jesus took the punishment we deserved. And in despair our Lord cried out: "My God, My God why have you forsaken me!" From heaven, to Bethlehem, to Golgotha, the Son of God humbled Himself,

emptied Himself, surrendered His all for you and me. He could have called 10,000 angels to rescue Him from the cross, but He willingly laid down His life for you and me.

And as a result, as a reward for His obedient suffering and death, the Father exalted Jesus 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 came down the staircase—from glory, to enfleshment, to the hell of Golgotha. Because Jesus came down the staircase in obedience, the Father lifted Him up. Christ was raised, ascended, and enthroned as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The only way up is down.

A young person once came to the aged St. Augustine and requested his best piece of advice on how to live a Jesus-shaped life. *"Begin with humility, my son,"* said the wise old saint, *"it's the first rule of godly living."* *"And the second?"* inquired the young man. *"Humility, my son, humility."* *"Is there a third?"* *"Humility, my son, humility. There is nothing else to add."* Jesus humbled himself, because Jesus is the most humble person in the universe. Jesus is God. And Jesus calls and empowers us to follow in His footsteps of humility. Paul writes: *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" [2:5].* Or as the familiar KJV *"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."*

Exactly what is humility? John Ortberg calls humility, *appropriate smallness* [p. 98]. You neither think too much of yourself or too little of yourself. Paul writes: *"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" [Romans 12:3].* When you tremble with joy before the fierce and friendly face of God, you don't get inflated ideas of your self-worth. *"You know there's only one Messiah allocated per universe and you're not it" [Isaiah Kreps].* You reckon with your limits. You know your boundaries. Your skin, your energy, your resources only stretch so far. Humility is related to the word for dirt, i.e. humus. Humble people are grounded, anchored in terra firma, live close to the earth. Because humble people are grounded in God, they don't need to call excessive attention to themselves or their status [Cornel West, *Christianity Today*, April 25, 1994]. Their approval comes from God. What is more they're free to affirm, build up, and compliment others. Because they operate with the abundance mentality and not the scarcity mentality. There's more than enough healthy approval to go around.

Sometimes we operate as if beneath our Clark Kent exterior, is a person in red tights with a huge "S" plastered on the chest. Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings with a single bound. We're Super-Christian. We don't need 7 hours of sleep a night. We have boundless energy, endless resources. Ortberg writes: *"Jesus was no Superman. He did not defy His enemies with hands on his hips and bullets bouncing harmlessly off his chest. The whip of the Roman soldiers drew real blood, the thorns pressed real flesh, the nails caused mind-numbing pain, the cross led to actual death. And through it all, he bore with them, forgave them and loved them to the end" [p. 117]. "God's great, holy joke about the messiah complex is this: Every human being who has*

ever lived has suffered from it—except one, and he was the Messiah" [p. 118].

Humility is a grandiosity buster. Jesus calls us to transformation. He calls us to morph down to size. Embrace your weakness. Become the person Christ engineered you to be. A Servant. Nothing more. Nothing less. Besides those red tights don't fit too well.