

Difficult Passages- Lake Geneva conf.1984 - Part 1

by William MacDonald

The sermon explores the difficult passage of John 14:28 and the doctrine of the equality of the Father and the Son, highlighting the distinction between positional greatness and personal greatness.

Duration: 36:12

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 11:11, John 13:34, John 14:28, Romans 8:28, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 2:7

Topics: "Conference"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of Jesus emptying himself to come in the form of humanity. The speaker emphasizes that Jesus was not God minus humanity, but rather God plus humanity. The speaker uses biblical passages such as Luke 1:28 and 42 and Philippians 2:7 to support this idea. The speaker explains that Jesus emptied himself by taking on the form of a servant and ultimately dying on the cross, and as a result, God exalted him and gave him a name above every name.

Transcript

Well, all the battles he fought were he was fighting for the Lord. Why was that such a bad thing? And I haven't had a chance to ask Rob the answer to that one yet. Tonight, I'd like you to turn to John chapter 14, if you would.

John chapter 14, and just let me begin reading in verse 25. John 14, 25. These things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you, but the Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you, not as the world giveth give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go away and come again unto you.

If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father, for my Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it come to pass, that when it is come to pass ye might believe. Hereafter I will not talk much with you, for the Prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in me, but that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do arise. Let us go

hence." Did you detect the difficult verse? The difficult verse is verse 28.

At the end of the verse, Jesus says, My Father is greater than I. Well, that's difficult, because I was always brought up to believe that God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit are equal, and if they're equal, how can the Father be greater than the Son? Problem. Let me just say at the first that, generally speaking, when you come to a Bible difficulty, usually the answer is right in the same context. You don't really have to go very far afield to get the answer, and whatever the proper explanation of that is, it has to do with the disciples rejoicing to know that Jesus was going back to the Father.

He said, If you loved me, you would rejoice when I say, I go to the Father, for my Father is greater than I. Now, I know the cults come along, and they show from this verse, they try to show from this verse that Jesus, of course, was just a created being, and that the Father is greater than him. But, you see, just saying that has nothing to do with the context of this verse. The context is, if you loved me, you'd rejoice when I say, I go to the Father, for my Father is greater than I. Say, whatever the proper explanation of that verse is, it has something to do with the disciples loving Jesus and rejoicing at the good news that he was going to go back to the Father.

Now, let me spend the first few minutes proving that the Lord Jesus is equal with the Father, and you'll say, What kind of double talk is that? Well, first of all, turn back to John, chapter 5, and I'd like to show you how equal with God the Father, the Lord Jesus is. John, chapter 5, and we'll begin reading in verse 25. John 5, 25, And when they had found him on the other side of the sea, Oh, I'm sorry, I've got the wrong chapter, and now I've got it.

John 5, 19. Sorry. Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do.

For what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. This verse of Scripture tells that the Son is equal with the Father in working. Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.

I know the cults pounce on the first part of that verse and say, well, the Son wasn't omnipotent. It says he can do nothing of himself. Dear friends, that verse had to do with the moral perfection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That means he couldn't do anything in self-will. He could only act as a man here on earth in perfect obedience to the will of God. In other words, you and I can't say that.

I can't say I can do nothing of myself. I can do a lot of things of myself, and unfortunately do, but Jesus was so morally perfect that he couldn't do anything in defiance of the will of God. He couldn't do anything in self-will.

He was perfectly conformed to the will of God, and in that moral perfection, whatever he saw God doing, he could do likewise. Equal in working. Verse 20.

For the Father loveth the Son, and showeth him all things that himself doeth, and he will show him greater works than these that he may marvel. The Son is equal with the Father in knowing, in knowledge. The Father shows him all things that himself doeth.

This passage of Scripture is intended to show the absolute equality of the Son with the Father in seven different respects. 21. For as the Father raises up the dead, and quickeneth them, so the Son quickeneth

whom he will.

The Son is equal with the Father in raising the dead. Proved it when he was here on earth, didn't he? Raise the son of the widow of Nain, raise Jairus' daughter, raise Lazarus, and raise himself as well. He said, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it again.

And he spoke of the temple, of his body. Also, verses 28 and 29, along the same line. Equal in raising the dead.

Verse 22. For the Father judges no man, but has committed all judgment unto the Son, that all men should honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He's equal in judging.

In fact, God has committed all judgment to him. The Lord Jesus is going to sit on the judgment seat for believers, and on the great white throne judgment for unbelievers. Equal with the Father in judging.

He's equal with the Father in honor. Says that all men should honor the Son even as they honor the Father. I like to ask Jehovah's Witnesses, Do you honor the Son as you honor the Father? And they honestly answer, Oh no, we don't.

Well, it's good to spring this verse on them at that particular point in the conversation, that all men should honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He that honoreth not the Son honoreth not the Father which hath sent him. Then he's equal with the Father in regenerating, in giving eternal life, in giving the new birth.

Verse 24. Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth in him that sent me hath everlasting life, shall not come into judgment, but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming, and now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live.

And then in verse 26, he's equal with the Father in self-existence. He's equal with the Father in self-existence, for as the Father hath life in himself, even so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself. Both of them are the fountain of life.

You and I have life bestowed upon us, but they are the source of all life. When it says the Father has given it to the Son, it doesn't mean there was a particular gift given in some period of time. The word given is often used in the Bible to express an assumed fact.

Unto you it is given not only to believe on his name, but to suffer. It's an assumed fact that Christians will suffer for the namesake of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, he's equal in self-existence, equal in working, equal in knowing, equal in raising the dead, equal in judging, equal in honor, equal in regenerating, and equal in self-existence.

But that brings us right back to John chapter 14, where we read, My Father is greater than I. How are we going to put it all together? Well, we put it together in this way. There are two ways in which the word greater is used in the New Testament, at least two in the New Testament. There's what we might call positional greatness, and there's what we call personal greatness.

For instance, I might ask you tonight, who is greater, the President of the United States or the Governor of Wisconsin? And, generally speaking, if I asked you that question, you'd say the President of the United States, and you wouldn't be thinking about their character at all. What would you be thinking about? You'd

be thinking about their position. You'd be thinking about the office that they hold, and the office of the President is greater than the office of the Governor, and, therefore, we say the President is greater than the Governor.

Positional greatness and personal greatness. Many of the rulers of the world have been positionally great, and yet they were rascals personally. Apply that.

Put that key in the door here in John chapter 14 verse 28. The Lord Jesus is saying, if you loved me, you would rejoice when I say I go to the Father, for the Father, my Father, is greater than I. Greater how? Personally? No, not for a minute. Equal personally, but greater positionally.

Let me explain it this way. When the Lord Jesus spoke these words, he was a man here on earth. The God-man, true, a man here on earth.

He was being abused by the creatures whom his hands had made. He was being reviled. He was being spit upon.

He was being scorned. He was being persecuted. He was enduring all manner of the contradiction of sinners against himself.

Really, it's unspeakable to think of what the Lord of life and glory went through as a person here on earth, isn't it? The Father never had to endure that. Nobody ever spit on the Father. Nobody ever jostled the Father in that noisy marketplace in Nazareth.

Nobody ever inflicted welts on the Father, and Jesus is saying, if you really loved me, you'd rejoice when I say I'm going back to the Father. Why? Because I won't have to endure that kind of treatment anymore, because I'll be forever free from the mistreatment of my creatures. In that sense, my Father is greater than I because he's never had to endure it positionally.

Positionally greater. In other words, that statement, my Father is greater than I, was only true when Jesus was here on earth as a man. It's not true.

It's not true positionally today, because the Lord Jesus is in heaven at God's right hand, given a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess him Lord to the glory of God the Father. Let me say this, when Jesus said my Father is greater than I, that statement was only true of his incarnation here on earth. It was only true when he was being cast out and tormented and agonized here on earth, and if the disciples really loved him, they would rejoice to hear him say, I'm going back to the Father, I won't have to put up with this any longer.

They would rejoice, because then, in that sense, the Father would no longer be greater than he. So, we must make this distinction in our study of the Word of God between positional greatness and personal greatness. Now, let's take another passage of scripture and put that key in and see if it will help us.

Matthew chapter 11 and verse 11. Matthew chapter 11 and verse 11. I think I'll go back a few verses.

The Lord Jesus is speaking about John the Baptist, of course. Let me go back to verse 7. And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea,

I say unto you, and more than a prophet, for this is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

Verily I say unto you," notice the word greater here again, "Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist, notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Can you fit the key in the door there? When Jesus said, there has not arisen a greater than John the Baptist, did he mean that John the Baptist had a better character than Abraham, Moses, the great prophets of the Old Testament era? I don't believe he meant that at all. I believe John the Baptist had a marvelous character. But greater than Daniel? Greater than Joseph? No reason to believe that for a moment.

What was the Lord Jesus speaking about in this verse? He was speaking about positional greatness. Nobody up to that time in the history of the world ever had the position of John the Baptist. What was the position? To be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Nobody had the marvelous privilege of standing out there one day and seeing Jesus coming and saying, behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. He was the messenger sent before the Messiah, and it was a privilege of, it was absolutely unparalleled in the history of the world. The Messiah had never come before, no forerunner before, and now John strides onto the stage of human history and he announces the coming of the Lord Jesus.

And so that's what Jesus is saying here. He says, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater positionally than John the Baptist. It's great, isn't it? So does the rest of the verse.

He that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. You say, that's me, I'm least in the kingdom of heaven. You have very small views of yourself.

It says you're greater than John the Baptist. You mean you're a better character? Well, I don't think anybody would claim that. I don't think that anybody would claim to have a better character than John the Baptist.

But really, our position today in Christ is better than John the Baptist. You know, it's a more wonderful thing to be living today and have the full New Testament in our hands than to be living when the disciples were here upon earth. We don't always realize that.

We sing, I think, when I read that sweet story of old when Jesus was here among men, how he drew little children as lambs to the fold. I should like to have been with him then, but it's really better to be with him now. You say, well, how can you say such a thing? Because, for instance, John the Baptist saw Jesus through John's eyes.

Matthew saw him through Matthew's eyes. Mark, Luke, John, they saw Jesus through their own eyes. But we see them through all their eyes, don't we? We know the Lord Jesus today by the Spirit of God in a more wonderful way than when they were here on earth.

And not alone that, but our position with regard to the Lord Jesus is greater. John spoke of himself as a friend of the bridegroom, right? We're members of the bride, those of us who are saved by grace through faith. Which is greater, to be a friend of the bridegroom or to be a member of the bride? Well, of course, it's far greater to be a member of the bride.

But remember, we're talking about position. We're not talking about person at all. Our position, just think of it, have you rejoiced in that lately? Our position today in Christ is greater than John the Baptist enjoyed when he was here on earth.

I think that key helps us in understanding the sacred scriptures, helps us greatly. Let's turn to another passage, Philippians chapter 2 verse 7, and put the key in the door again. Philippians chapter 2 verse 7. Well, let me see, we'll begin reading in verse 4, Philippians 2 chapter 4. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery or a prize to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and the literal translation there is, but emptied himself, emptied himself, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men, and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. I'm thinking of verses 6 and 7, who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.

Now, you probably know that most of the great heresies that have arisen in the Christian church have arisen with regard to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and many take this passage of scripture to teach that when the Lord Jesus came down to earth, he voluntarily laid aside some of the attributes of deity. He emptied himself of the attributes of deity when he was here. I'm really amazed how man, in his haughtiness and arrogance, tries to analyze the person of the Lord Jesus, unwilling to admit that the union of God and man in one person defies human comprehension.

Can't be done. Jesus himself said that. He said, No man knows the Father, but the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.

No man knows the Son, but the Father. Period. Do you get that difference? No one knows the Father, but the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.

No one knows the Son, but the Father. Period. Now, what does it mean here when it says that he did not think it robbery, a prize, to be equal with God? Is it talking about personal equality? Not for a moment.

The Lord Jesus cannot be anything less than full God. You can't lay aside attributes of deity and still be deity, and the whole thing is bizarre and wrong. But, when it says he thought it not robbery to be equal with God, he was thinking of the position in heaven.

Here's a world that needed to be redeemed. You and I down here, lost, dead in trespasses and in sin, and the Lord Jesus could have said, I'm not going to leave the comfort and security and bliss of this being in heaven. He could have said that, but he didn't think that that position of equality, that position of equality with God in heaven was something he had to hold on to at all costs.

He said, no, there are people down there that need to be saved. I'm going to go down and die on a cross of shame to save them. When you say it, he emptied himself.

Yes, he did. He emptied himself. What did he empty himself? He emptied himself of that position in heaven.

That's what he emptied himself of, and the passage goes on to explain that. It describes his descent, his incarnation, his coming as a man, his coming as a servant, his being made obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Some of our assemblies have been wracked in recent years by false doctrine concerning the person of Christ.

A man whom I respected for many years wrote that when Jesus came to earth, he laid aside his deity, and he'll never take it up again, and he based it on Philippians chapter two. That is not what the passage teaches. More recently, we've been wracked by the whole discussion of what they call the messianic awareness.

When did Jesus first realize he was the Messiah? And the profound conclusion is that when he became 12, he at last knew he was the Messiah. Dear friends, I think that's wrong. I think it's false.

I think it demeans the person of Christ. I can't explain it, but there was never a time in his life when he didn't have perfect knowledge. There was never a time in his life when he wasn't omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, when he did not have all the attributes of deity.

Paul says it very nicely in Colossians, doesn't he? He says, "...in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." I think that's one of the strongest verses on the absolute deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. "...in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." So, when you come to Philippians chapter two, and you read that he didn't think that equality with God was something that he had to hold on to at all costs, just remember it's referring to his position there in heaven. He didn't say, I have to stay here in heaven at all costs and be on that positional equality with God.

He said, I'm going to come down, I'm going to suffer that contradiction of sinners against myself in order that men and women might not die eternally in hell. Wonderful, wonderful Jesus. And when it says that he emptied himself, don't think for a minute that he emptied himself of any attribute of deity.

It's not only untrue, it's impossible. My Savior, as a man here on earth, had perfect knowledge. He knew where all the fish were in the Sea of Galilee.

He knew what men beside him were thinking, although he never exposed them needlessly. He was in all places at the same time, although his body might have been limited to Nazareth at any one time. The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he said when he was here on earth, he hath declared him.

Contend earnestly for the absolute deity and perfect humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ. He emptied himself of his position in heaven. That's what he emptied himself of.

It was a positional emptying, not a personal emptying. I remember Charles Van Ryn saying to me, Bill, the best way to explain he emptied himself is to just quote the verses that follow. And there was great wisdom in that.

You'll never run into heresy if you do that. You explain he emptied himself by just the verses that follow, by becoming a man, by becoming a servant, by going to the cross, by dying there, the death of the cross. Let me just put it this way.

Jesus, as a man on earth, was not God minus, he was God plus. You say, what do you mean by that? Jesus, as a man here on earth, was not God minus some of his quality, some of his characteristics, some

of his personal excellencies. He was God plus humanity.

You know, he emptied himself by taking on humanity. You say that sounds paradoxical. Well, it's a blessed paradox, I'll tell you.

The paradox is a truth standing in its head to attract attention, and that's what this paradox is designed to do. Jesus was God plus humanity. It was no emptying for you to come in the form of humanity.

It was no emptying for me to come in the form of humanity. There was no other way for us to come, but I'll tell you it was a marvelous emptying for the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of life and glory, to come in the form of humanity. Maybe we have time to look at just one more, and that's in Luke chapter 1 verses 28 and 42.

Luke chapter 1 and verse 24, did I say? Luke chapter 1 verse 28 and 42. 28. And the angel came in unto her and said, Hail thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou among women. Verse 42. And she spoke out with a loud voice and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

Now, this has to do with the position of Mary, the mother of our Lord. I really believe that Mary, the Virgin Mary, was a woman of outstanding character. Not sinless, because she needed a savior, and her soul rejoiced in God, her savior, and she said so.

But she had an unparalleled position, that of being the mother of the Lord Jesus. Her womb was the antechamber by which he entered this world. No other woman ever had that position.

But I don't think it means that she was a woman of greater character than anyone who had ever gone before, although I wouldn't impugn her character for a moment. She was a choice, young Israeli woman whom God chose to be the vehicle for giving birth to his beloved son. She needed a savior.

She said, My spirit hath rejoiced in God my savior. But, did you ever know that Mary was more blessed in the fact that she believed in Jesus than in that she was his mother? Turn to Luke chapter 11 and verse 27. There we read these verses, these words, It came to pass, as he spake these things, a certain woman out of the company lifted up her voice and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps, the breasts which thou didst suck.

But he said, Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it. In other words, there's something more blessed than to be the mother of the Lord and to give birth to the Lord. What was that? It was to hear his word and to keep it.

Who said that? Jesus said that. And so, I say again that Mary's position was a marvelous position. It was unparalleled, unique.

No one else could ever have that position of giving birth to the Messiah. But, Mary was more blessed in the fact that she believed on the Lord Jesus Christ than in the fact that she gave him birth. So, I'd just like to leave this little key with you tonight.

When you come to the word greater and the whole discussion of position, remember that greater can be used of position, or it can be used of person. It can be used of the office a person holds, or it could be used of his personal character. And if you make that decision, it helps a lot.

Paul recognized the position of the high priest, but he didn't respect him as a man. A difference between the two. He had a valid position, but his character didn't match up with it.

The Lord bless his word to our hearts tonight. Incidentally, if some of you have difficult portions that have bothered you over the years, I'd love it if you'd share them with me. We might take up some of them this week, but I'd really appreciate it if you'd tell me some verse that has really been nagging you that you'd really like to get help on.

I'm not saying I can help you, but I'd like to add it to my collection. Shall we pray? Father, we thank you for your precious word. We adore the infinity of scripture.

We stand in awe of thy word. We thank you tonight for the Holy Spirit of God who's given to lead us into all truth. We think of those tonight in occult and false teachings, men who are apparently under your judgment.

We pray, Lord, that many of them might be rescued, especially from these false views concerning our adorable Lord. Help us illuminate the holy page by the Spirit of God. We pray that we might be able workmen, rightly dividing the word of truth.

We ask it in Jesus' name, giving thanks. Amen. The meeting is over.

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