

Christian Virtues: A Really Great Sermon About Humility! Mic. 6:6-8; Luke 18:9-14; Phil. 2:1-11; Rom. 12:3 7/7/19

A man and a woman are standing by the road, when the man looks up and sees a turtle flying overhead, his jaws clamped tightly onto a rope stretched between two flying birds. “Oh, my gosh!” he exclaims, “I’ve never seen anything like that! I wonder who thought of it?” Overhearing the couple’s conversation, the prideful little turtle couldn’t contain himself. “I did.....” he yelled, as he plummeted to earth.

In his book, The Road to Character, David Brooks points out how much our society has changed regarding the virtue of humility. At the end of WWII, speeches celebrating the end of the war almost always sounded notes of humility, thanking our allies and God for the victory. Back then government officials almost never wrote memoirs, in contrast to today where it seems that almost every government functionary writes one! And our current president is known for a lot of things, but he has never been known for his humility, yet that didn’t prevent his election to our nation’s highest office! Surveys of youth reflect this change, too. In 1950, when asked, “Do you consider yourself to be a very important person?” 12% of young people answered, “Yes.” By 2005 that percentage had risen to 80%! It appears that we have a humility shortage in this country.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about this virtue. Listen to this passage from Micah 6. The context is ancient Israel, where burnt offerings and grain offerings were an important part of worshiping God.

⁶“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)

In the midst of a people who engaged in the outward acts of religion, but ignored God in their relationships, oppressing and cheating their fellow Israelites, God makes it clear that he isn't impressed even by the most over-the-top sacrificial offerings imaginable. What God desires from them is a heart characterized by three things- justice, kindness, and humility. A number of theologians believe that humility is the foundational virtue, because unless someone is humble enough to see and acknowledge his or her imperfections, spiritual growth in all areas will be cut off. And so will his or her relationship with God.

Listen to this story Jesus told in Luke 18. ⁹*Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and*

regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

Now the Pharisees were generally very good, religious people. They gave to the poor, gave away 10% of their income, attended synagogue and temple faithfully, and meticulously kept God’s commandments. But the pride of this particular Pharisee was clearly keeping his prayers from being answered and was cutting him off from God. The only thing the “sinner” had going for him was his humility, and it was enough! This virtue of humility is foundational to our relationship with God. We must come to God honestly, just as we are, sinners in need of God’s grace and mercy.

But what exactly is humility, and how do we get some? I like what Paul has to say about it in Romans 12. ³*For by the grace given to me I*

say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Rom. 12:3) Rev. Tim Keller once said, “Humility isn’t thinking less of yourself; it’s thinking of yourself less!” I like that. Being humble just means seeing ourselves as we really are, as God sees us. That means we have great value, because we are made in the very image of God, but we also admit that the image of God in us has become distorted due to sin, and that we are helpless to do anything about our sin on our own. We all have significant flaws and we need God’s help to overcome them.

Pride tempts us to think of ourselves as the center of the universe. Humility recognizes that we aren’t! Pride tempts us to believe that we fully know and understand the world around us. Humility reminds us that we don’t. When my niece, Macy, was three years old, her mother was praying with her before she went to bed. After their prayers, Macy kept coming up with more things to pray for to delay her mother leaving the room.

“Macy, you know you can keep praying to God after I leave. You can pray any time,” said her mother.

“Will God hear me?”

“Yes, dear. God always listens to your prayers.”

After a long pause, Macy asked, “Will God go to sleep?”

“No, Macy. God never sleeps.”

Another reflective pause. Then Macy said, “Maybe he just doesn’t have a comfortable bed!”

I smiled when I heard her three year-old thoughts about God. They made perfect sense to her, but her limited experience led her to erroneous conclusions! I wonder if God smiles at us sometimes, for our limited, mortal experience surely leads us to erroneous conclusions about the great mysteries of the universe. Humility acknowledges that we are limited, mortal beings, prone to false conclusions because of our limits and biases! I think that’s part of what Paul is getting at when he calls us to think of ourselves with “sober judgment.”

Finally, if you want to know what humility looks like, you need look no farther than Jesus. Paul writes, ³*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.* ⁴*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.* ⁵*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,* ⁶*who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,* ⁷*but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,* ⁸*he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.* ⁹*Therefore*

God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:3-11)

In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul confronted a problem they were having in getting along with each other. He believes that a humble spirit is the key to improving their relationships with each other. And he cites Jesus himself as the ultimate example of humility! Jesus was willing to set aside his own rights and prerogatives as the Son of God in order to do the will of his Father. His humble obedience resulted in the salvation of the world, including you and me! Paul calls us to follow the example of Jesus if we want our relationships to improve.

Pride is lethal to deep human connections. Prideful people are often poor listeners, because we believe we already know everything! Pride can keep us from correcting our hurtful behavior to others, because we think we're always right. And defending this false sense of importance and rightness can cause us to rationalize truly evil thinking and actions. All of these fruits of a prideful spirit poison deep, loving relationships. If you want to have strong, healthy relationships, you have to deal with pride.

So, how do we become more humble? We begin by honestly acknowledging to God and ourselves our struggle with pride! And we ask

God to help us become more humble, to see ourselves as we really are, rather than the false image of ourselves that pride creates. And God will answer that prayer!

A few years ago, I was standing in Fellowship Hall after a worship service, when a member of our congregation introduced me to a guest she had brought to worship. After I introduced myself, the guest commented, “Oh, you’re the preacher! I didn’t recognize you. You looked taller in the pulpit!” God has a way of bringing people and events into our lives that keep us humble. Sometimes it’s just a stray comment that keeps you from feeling too big for your britches. Other times it may be a real criticism of you or your work. In that moment of criticism you can choose to defend yourself, or you can work on your humility by truly listening to the criticism to see if there is any truth in it. And as we spend time with God reading his Word and praying, we can open ourselves to see things that need to change. That’s how we cooperate with God in becoming more humble people.

In the conclusion of The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien, Gandalf says this to the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins. “And why should the old prophecies prove not to be true? Surely, you don’t disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don’t really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for

your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!”

And so are we all!