

[1] **Walking Humbly Before God**

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Sunday 4th November 2018

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Readings: Psalm 91, Job 38:1-7 & 33-41, Mark 10:35-45, Hebrews 4:12-16

We mentioned last week that virtues prepare us for heaven, for life in God's presence. The prophet Micah (6:8) tells us that, in essence, God requires three things of us: ***"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."*** This morning we will consider the virtue of humility. It is a virtue we see demonstrably lacking in the political arena most of the time but, dare I say it, in our own lives as well from time to time. Yet, in the Scriptures humility, is seen is an important virtue for a reason that we will see.

Of course, we know the antonym, the opposite, of humility is what? Yes, you're right – pride. ***Proverbs 16:18*** tell us that ***"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."*** Clearly then, these are things to avoid. Better Proverbs 11:2 that advises, ***"When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom."*** In fact, to walk in pride is to set ourselves up against God. As James 4:6 advises, ***"God opposes the proud, but shows favour to the humble."*** Clearly then, it is better to be humble, so what is it to be humble?

When we talk of Biblical humility we speak of the humility that we recognise in Jesus. He who, Philippians 2:6-8 tells us, ***"[w]ho, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!"*** Some would see such humility as a sign of weakness and avoidance, of escapism from dealing with reality, as taking the easy way out. Or worse being taken out. Far from it. For the follower of God humility is a sure strength. In Jesus' case, as Philippians (2:9-11) continues to add, ***"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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*** The raw cost of Jesus humility may have been His betrayal, torture and death but the net profit of His humility was resurrection and exaltation to the highest place and authority over all the earth – not a bad pay day for humility! Jesus in humility and obedience looked first to do what God wanted, irrespective of the cost ... and yes Jesus did know what He was doing and what it would cost ... that's what the Garden of Gethsemane is about. Jesus alone could only make the decision to continue to walk in obedience and humility and not take the easy way out. He could have given up. He could have returned to Galilee. He could have tried to make it up with the religious leaders and work with them, but He didn't. Jesus deliberately chose to humble Himself, and suffer, in order to be obedient to God's will. It wasn't, by the way, that God wanted Jesus to suffer. Suffering is an

unfortunate but inevitable outcome of being righteous in an evil world, just as pain is an inevitable outcome of being a loving person. However, in God's economy there is great long-term reward in being obedient, being humble, being a loving person. The long-term rewards far and away outshine the momentary challenges of this world.... if only we can see the picture clearly.

Humility teaches us to see ourselves in the role that God wants us to be on this earth, as Jesus was, as servants of God and of others. It is to love other above ourselves. The apostle Paul, in Philippians 2, put it this way, ***“make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”*** The temptation we face in being selfish comes from comparing ourselves and our desires with those about us. Instead we get a better sense of our place when we consider who God is. Job was like us. He considered that what was happening to him was unfair and he challenged God on this. God doesn't answer Job in the way he or we might like. Instead God challenges Job to consider his own position before God. Only God knows the big picture and why things happen the way they do. His purposes are strange to us because He is God but His promise is that, for the faithful, all will work out well in the end. It has for Jesus hasn't it and He is the first-fruit of all of us. God's challenge to Job to brace himself like a man is ironic. Job thinks he's a man standing up to God whereas, in fact, his real manhood is to face up to the challenge that is placed before him rather than trying to blame God and squirm out of facing the challenges with grace and courage. We too can do this so easily. Instead of facing up to the challenges in front of us bravely and deliberately we want to metaphorically run away – finding someone else to blame or to do the work, some excuse why it's not our fault or responsibility whereas God is actually not asking these questions. Rather God is looking to see how we will go about gracefully meeting the challenges being true men and women of God. This is true spiritual growth. At least Job's reply to God was honest – ***“I know that You can do all things, that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted ... I spoke of things I did not understand”*** (Job 42:2-3) ... and Job repented. God would later bless Job with far more than he had at the start in many ways.

Jesus did not make this mistake. He did not consider His equality with God something to be asserted but chose humility, so we too are called to value others more highly and to serve them freely and lovingly. And I'd like to suggest that for many people this does not come naturally but we have to work at it. In a world that stresses putting yourself first above everything else this is an entirely counter-cultural message. In putting Jesus first, we put others first and then ourselves. In truly loving others we point them to Jesus by our loving heart in action. This takes practice and sometimes deliberate effort, especially when our emotional response to some people or their attitudes makes us want to have a very different response. Again, this is a sign of a strong person, it is not weakness.

James and John, those Sons of Thunder, the sons of Zebedee, so aptly nicknamed for their fiery determination to achieve, learned humility the hard way. They came to Jesus wanting His assurance of their reward and elevation to high status. Incidentally, when the other disciples heard about this they were incensed and one can imagine the atmosphere in camp must have been somewhat strained for a while. While Jesus recognised that these two disciples were sincere and would indeed, as they said, suffer for the gospel it was not up to Him to promote them. That was for later. Instead they would have to learn humility first by being the servants, even a slave, of all Jesus says, if they truly want to achieve greatness. Mother Teresa summed it up well when she said, *“Humility is the mother of all virtues - purity, charity and obedience. It is in being humble that our love becomes real, devoted and ardent. If you are humble, nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are. If you are blamed, you will not be discouraged. If they call you a saint you will not put yourself on a pedestal.”* James and John had a long way to travel before they would be ready.

Humility will also stand against that which is wrong. Not because of ego or anything else but because of a righteous heart. Such a humble heart is one that has learned to be responsive to the Word of God. Hebrews tells us that ***“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”*** In prayer and self-reflection as we come before God, as we read His Word, His Spirit will quicken in us to those areas in our lives we need to work on. I know this from experience. There have been many areas of my life that have changed dramatically since becoming a Christian at 18. I know there is still a lot to work on and I have to stay tuned to what the Spirit is saying if I am to grow. No one can do it for me. There is no excuse, nowhere to hide. That double edged sword cuts through all sham and pretence. It is up to me, as it is up to you, to respond and do the work of God and allow His work of change and challenge in our lives. Humbling ourselves requires us to do, sometimes, the thing we least want to do. Matthew 5:23-24, says for example, ***“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”*** This takes courage and a heart willing to be humble before God and others. Jesus was meek and gentle, yet He chased the money-changers out of the Temple with a whip of cords. This takes a mixture of passion and humility so that pride in self-achievement does not falsely promote self. Proverbs 15:1 tells us, ***“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”*** Who of us needs to win an argument. Yes, I’ve been in that place. But you can win an argument and lose a friend. Humility and wisdom are needed to learn how to speak the truth in love. We can all vent, but does it really help? Humility sees the need of the other and finds a way to speak into their lives.

The rewards of humility are beyond measure, for others and for us, although the challenges of the immediate and our fallen nature can be great. Only with dedication, perseverance and our eyes on Jesus will we achieve the nature we are called to. And guess what? In this process we learn wisdom. True wisdom – true spiritual insight applied to all the knowledge and experience we have gained. When this happens we see the world through Jesus eyes and grow a heart desire to walk before God humbly. And when we do, we too can be assured, as Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, that the effort, the struggle, the pain, are all worth it for the goal ahead and reward promised.

We close by reflecting on those great words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30, ***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”***

Amen