

Philippians 2.1-11 (1984 NIV)

Humility in a Haughty World

Introduction

A famous American football coach was on vacation with his family in a part of the US. When they walked into a movie theatre and sat down, the handful of people there applauded.

He thought to Himself, "I can't believe it. People recognize me all the way up here."

Then a man came over to him and said, "Thanks for coming. They won't start the movie for less than 20 people."

Humility is one of the most difficult to find traits in our society. But it is one of the most important traits in the eyes of God.

Jesus said in Luke 14:8-11, "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

So often we try to raise our esteem in the eyes of men when we ought to be showing our willingness to lower ourselves. Indeed, looking for an opportunity to take a "lower seat", to act with humility is not very much part of human nature.

That's exactly the focus of our text this morning—the attitude of humility. But first, something brief about the background of our text today.

Paul was writing to the Christians in Philippi from a Roman prison. He was awaiting his trial before Caesar, to whom he had appealed. Paul had a very strong attachment to the believers in Philippi. He was the one who first came to Philippi with the Gospel.

He and Silas suffered a cruel beating and a night in prison before God intervened to deliver them (Acts 16:16ff). After Paul left Philippi, the believers there continued to stand with him in the defence and proclamation of the Gospel. Later, they began to experience suffering for the sake of the Gospel (Phi. 1:29). So Paul had to write to comfort them in their adversity and to

encourage them to stay united. And this unity was rooted in one crucial attitude—humility.

What does it mean to be humble?

I. Verses 3-4

Verses 3-4 read like this in the NIV: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Paul began by contrasting humility with its opposites—selfish ambition and vanity. Selfish ambition and vanity always incite us to compete with others in order to gain at their expense, rather than to contribute to their well-being.

But Paul exhorts us this morning to “in humility consider others better than yourselves”. A more literal translation of what Paul is saying here is this—“in humility esteem others to the extent of viewing them as surpassing yourselves”. This means that I choose to esteem another person not to be on par with me, but to even surpass me.

Put in another way, even though another person may not in reality be better than me, I nevertheless choose to treat that person with more importance for him and less regard for my own prominence.

Jesus Christ came to serve sinful people rather than to be served by them not because He considered them as better than Himself. But He came to serve sinful people because He considered them as important in God's plan of redemption.

Indeed, humility desires to advance the well-being and interests of others. Verse 4 indicates that we set the interests of others above our own.

I became a Christian when I was a young working adult. Before that, I had no experience of depending on God about school exams. If I did well in my exams, I believed it was because I had studied hard. If I did badly, I believed it was because I had neglected my studies. God was never in the picture at all.

One time when I was in seminary, I had to revise at home for a coming OT exam. The phone rang. I picked it up and could recognize the voice at the other end. It was a close brother in Christ. He was emotionally troubled and asked me to be with him.

The first response in my heart was to say “no” to him. After all, I had a very valid reason to stay at home. I needed to revise for an important exam the next day. But something inside me told me to put aside what I thought was an important thing, and go to be by his side. .

I spent the night with him. We talked and prayed late into the night. Next morning, good news—I came down with flu with a running nose and sore throat!

I felt so lousy that I could not make my way to take my OT exam that morning. So I called my OT professor to tell him that I was with my friend the whole night; that I was not really prepared for the exam; that I did not sleep well the whole night; that I was down with flu; that I would STILL come to class to take the exam IF he insisted. But he was gracious enough to allow me to take the exam on another day, with the promise that I would not contact anyone who had taken the exam for information about it.

The day when I took the exam, I was still troubled by the flu. But I did the best I could and left it to the Lord.

When the results were finally out, guess who got the highest marks? It was I. Why? Because the others had misunderstood a certain question, but I was the only one who somehow had understood it correctly, and hence, answered to the point.

What did I learn from that as a seminary student preparing for the ministry? You get good grades if you don't skip church during exam time? Seriously, I learned that when I put someone's interest higher than my own, the Lord would somehow approve that in His own sovereign way.

Let humility prompt us to serve others. But putting the interests of others ahead of my own does not mean that I should be subject to the whims of everyone who makes demands of me. Sometimes seeking the "best interests" of others may mean I need to say a firm "no" to them.

And just as it is natural for others to get more for themselves, our natural thinking is that the more we can get for ourselves, the happier we will be. But God's Word tells us that the opposite is true. If we want to get more of what God has for us, we must be prepared to be last; to be willing to put others first. The best and most that God has for us won't come from stepping on and over others. They come from looking out for the interests of others.

So what does it mean to be humble? It is to consider others as more important than ourselves. It is to esteem others not to be on par with us, but to be even surpassing us.

What would it look like for us to consider others in such a manner in a "ME-FIRST" world? Some examples:

- Others are important—let others go first (giving way to others while driving).
- Others are important—keep your promises to them.

- Others are important—be punctual (don't be punctual only when you have a key role to play).
- Others are important—give to them and not just take from them.

So what does it mean to be humble?

II. Verses 5-11

Verses 5-6 read this way: “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.”

Paul had been exhorting the Christians in Philippi to be united in their time of adversity. He had indicated that the basis for such unity is humility, considering the interests of others more important than our own (vv. 3-4).

Paul then pointed to Jesus Christ as the supreme example of humility (2:5ff). Paul began by affirming the Lord's position and status, which would give Him claims to certain rights of power and authority.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has always existed as the Second Person of the Godhead (i.e. as God the Son in the Holy Trinity). He is fully equal with God the Father in His essence. Even though He is equal with God the Father, He did not grasp this as an opportunity to independently further His own interests while He was on earth.

How different our Lord was from Satan. Equality with God was never a possibility for Satan because he was a created being. Nevertheless, Satan sought to attain equality with God. This brought about his downfall and would ultimately end in his eternal destruction (Isa. 14:13-15; Rev. 20:1-10).

But our Lord Jesus Christ is not like Satan. Though equal with God (or, we might say, equally God), our Lord did not grasp this as an opportunity to further His own interests at the expense of the Father. Instead, He “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (v. 7).

There has been some debate over this term “made nothing” or “emptied”.

- It cannot mean that our Lord set aside His divinity; that He ceased to be God when He took on human flesh.
- It cannot mean that He diminished His divinity, becoming less God in essence.

So it is with the Lord's “making Himself nothing” or “emptying of Himself”. He did not cease to be God. What He set aside (or “made nothing” or “emptied”) was His right to experience only the glory, majesty, honour and worship of heaven. In making himself nothing, the Lord left the glory and splendour of heaven, and came down to dwell on earth. What is this coming down like?

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- It would be like owning a chauffeur-driven limousine, but choosing to ride with others in a crowded bus.
- It would be like owning a grand mansion with servants constantly in attendance, and the finest food and clothing always close at hand, but choosing to live among poor people in the most impoverished community.

When our Lord Jesus Christ came down from heaven to live on earth, He not only suffered as a man, He also suffered by living among men. Think of the agony of living among sinful people who were hard-hearted and slow to believe. This was His “suffering” as He mingled among the sinfulness of men in His sinless being. Hence, it is not surprising to hear the agony in His voice when He said in Matt. 17:17, “O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”

In the world today, people don’t like to stoop low. But our Lord Jesus Christ chose to stoop low in His humility. And God the Father elevated Him to the highest possible place of honour. Verses 9-11 read—“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.”

Now, these few verses can easily be misunderstood. We misunderstand when we think that Jesus submitted Himself to the Father’s interests in order to further His own interests—i.e. to be eventually exalted by the Father to the highest. Put in another way, Jesus had an ulterior motive for personal advancement.

But understand that when Jesus Christ subordinated His interests to that of the Father, He truly wanted the Father’s perfect interests to be served. His exaltation by the Father was not on His mind when He did that. You might say that our Lord’s exaltation was not His primary goal for doing the Father’s will, but it’s only the Father’s perfect design and desire for His obedient Son.

What are the implications of this attitude of Christ for church life today?

- One, view leadership as a ministry of stewardship and not a mustering of power and authority. Leaders are especially to look out for the weak and the vulnerable.

Most people can handle responsibilities ... if you pay them enough. But it takes a Christ-like leader to handle privileges. Such a leader will use his privileges to help others. A lesser leader will use privileges to help himself.

The attitude God requires of leaders is the exact opposite of the attitude that the world has regarding leadership—i.e. not to abuse their

power and position to further their own interests, and ignoring the interests of others.

- Two, view equality not only in terms of rights and privileges, but also in terms of humble servanthood. The Lord did not consider His equality with the Father to be grasped for personal advantage. He set aside the benefits of this equality and became a servant so that the Father's interests could be served. To have the attitude of Christ is to put aside our claims to equal rights and privileges, and to serve the good interests and well-being of others.

The danger in our society where equality is such a dominant driving force is that many are tempted to grasp it for personal gain. But Paul tells us in our text today that equality is the context for humility and for submission. In fact, humility is most evident in relationships that are on an equal level because that's when submission is very much voluntary and mutual, not compelled and one-sided.

An example of application is that of spiritual gifts. Some may think that just because they have a certain spiritual gift, they have the "right" to exercise it when, where, and how they like. All too often spiritual gifts are "grasped" as the occasion for promoting personal interests, rather than for serving others. Humility will prompt us to put the interests of others above our own.

- Three, view humility as not the plight of the poor and powerless, but the choice of the successful and powerful. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the supreme example of humility in the context of one who is equal to God the Father in power and glory. To have the attitude of Christ is to demonstrate that same humility when we are blessed with success and power.

So what does it mean to be humble? It is to serve with little thought for self-promotion and a higher estimation of others. It is to think little of our rights to help ourselves, but much of our responsibilities to help others.

Conclusion

Ted Haggard was once the Senior Pastor of the vibrant New Life Church in Colorado Springs in the US. He also once headed the National Association of Evangelicals which then represented millions of Christians in 45,000 congregations throughout the US. Ted Haggard's passionate ministry at that time was to speak out and champion against homosexuality.

In 2006, this man who had stood so high on the spiritual pedestal was brought tumbling down into the pit of disgrace. He was exposed for engaging himself in homosexual activities. He was asked by his church

to resign and leave the area as well as to commit himself to undergo therapy.

Though his family members were shocked by the revelations of his secret sin, they stood by him. His wife refused to leave him because she really loved him. One of his children—son Marcus—felt more connected to him when his father's life of sin was exposed. He said this of his father, "He had lived so long on a pedestal. He seemed practically perfect. There was a sense of relief in the fact that we could connect with our dad."

(*The New Paper*, 3 Feb. 09, p.18)

The pride of this world is always tempting people to clamour for ways to stand and stay on the high pedestal. They want to be a person apart from the crowd by being above the crowd.

You want your life to be set apart from the crowd? Scripture calls us today to do this not by living in pride above others, but living in humility among others and putting their interests before our own.

Let me close by posing some searching questions we can reflect on to help us nurture an attitude of humility:

- How much do I argue with people that I am right?
- How anxious am I about others' recognition of my contributions?
- How secretly envious am I at the success of others?
- How quickly do I criticize others who are different from me?
- How much time do I spend talking about myself?
- How difficult is it for me to say "I was wrong" or "I don't know"?

I pray that God will help us reflect on how these questions apply to us personally and as a church with honesty, and seek Him to help us correct ourselves with humility.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, it is much easier to listen to a sermon than to put it into practice. We confess that our problem isn't information. We already know what you want from us. Now help us to do it. Give us the attitude of Christ that we might live as He did—living to serve others with an attitude of humility so that we might serve with their well-being and good interests at heart in ways pleasing before you. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ who gave Himself to do your will and for our sake. Amen!