

## Relationships: Humility

I want to start off today's message with a few quotes -- hopefully one or two of them will be memorable for you.

*When science discovers the center of the universe, a lot of people will be disappointed to find they are not it. (Bernard Baily)*

*Nobody stands taller than those willing to stand corrected. (William Safire)*

*We'd like to be humble; but what if no one notices? (John Ortberg)*

*There is no room for God in him who is full of himself (Martin Buber)*

*It is far more impressive when others discover your good qualities without your help (anon.)*

*A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small bundle. (Benjamin Franklin)*

*Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real. (Thomas Merton)*

And just for fun, the master of misusing English:

*It ain't the heat, it's the humility (Yogi Berra)*

From there, let's look at a series of quotations from a more authoritative source, the New Testament and some of its "one anothers".

*Honor one another above yourselves (Rom. 12:10)*

*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)*

*All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' (1 Peter 5:5)*

Now, I wonder how many of us want to be a part of the group that God is actively opposing? How many want to start your day with the thought that God is against you? That's what this last verse suggests: that God opposes those who are proud, those who think too highly of themselves.

Let's go back and look at these three texts a little more closely. "Honor one another above yourselves." Oh, he isn't saying "at the same level"; he's saying, "above." I'm to honor you above myself. I'm to place you on a higher level than I am placing myself. Paul doesn't even say that you deserve to be put in a higher place; he just says that I'm supposed to put you there.

Why? Because as long as we're striving to be equal to or better than other people, we're not cooperating with God's agenda for our lives. He's not asking us to come out on top, but to love people for His sake. He's not asking us to prove that we're better than somebody else, but to prove that we love Him by serving others in humble grace. He's not asking us to be richer, better looking, smarter or more fit than the person who lives next door, but He does ask us to be faithful to the promises we make, to love sacrificially, to honor God and to spend our lives keeping in step with the Spirit.

The second verse tells us to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Submission has a negative sound to the ears of independence-minded, self-reliant Westerners, but what it really is is an affront to our pride. On one occasion, Jesus noted

that a submitted person is one who is under authority -- a person who takes orders from someone higher. That's what we're called to do as Christians -- take our marching orders from our Creator. But being submitted to one another, allowing others to speak into our lives, to bring correction, to give us input into our gifts and calling, to motivate us towards service and love -- that's a challenge to the way our culture has formed us. Did you catch that? I'm suggesting that how we look at the world, how we respond to words like "submission" is directly a result of the way our culture has conditioned us to think. And now we're looking in our Bibles and finding the world's way isn't God's way.

If we're not trying to impress the world with how important we are, with our knowledge, with our skills or with our commanding personality, then we're okay to be submitted, to learn from others, to allow them to set the direction and then we follow in it. That's what submitted people do, and they can do this on a whole bunch of levels because they're not trying to compete.

The third verse: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" This is a striking image - clothing yourself, putting on the garment called humility. It's close to the skin, it effects the way people see you, and it speaks of how you want to present yourself to the world. Those are the things that clothing does and when our clothing is humility, the world will see a person who is a builder, an encourager, a person who is secure as a child of God and able to give focused attention to others.

I've mentioned before that I teach a class called "The Story of His Glory" in the course called "Perspectives on the World Christian Movement". This second week of the course deals with the purpose of mission; that God would receive the glory He deserves from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. It's a week that focuses on Bible study and how we apply that practically. During the second hour, I give the class an assignment: talk with the others at your table about one humble person you have known. In my mind it's an easy question because every body must know one humble person -- but it's amazing to me that time after time there are groups that struggle to find one person to describe. After their small group discussions, I ask them to then tell the whole group what makes a humble person - what do they look like, how do they relate with you? And that's when I find out how few people have a relationship with a truly humble person. To me, that's a bit scary. This passage says that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble and we can't think of any humble people? We can't think of any people who are so secure in the Father's love that they don't need to put themselves out trying to make a good impression; they just freely and easily love people, and thereby make the most wonderful impression possible?

Maybe what we really need is someone to teach us, "I am a child of God" and "I have a Father who loves me."

And then we need to walk with that Father until all our pretension and foolish striving to be more and better than we actually are, is over and done with. Then we can relax and, in humility, in submission, we can honor others above ourselves, we can clothe ourselves in humility towards one another and we can live for God's glory and not our

own. What a huge burden we carry, trying to be important or pretending to be somebody we're not. This is the weight that we place on our own shoulders when we refuse to put on the clothes of humility, when we reject for ourselves the way that Jesus related to others.

Okay, let's make it a bit easier. Let me describe for you what a humble person looks like, and then you'll know if you've met anyone like that.

1. A humble person is not afraid to admit weaknesses or mistakes they have made, nor are they awkward in telling you about wonderful things they have done. They can talk about winning a prize or achieving a goal in such a way that you realize they're not bragging about it, nor is it what makes them who they are - they just did it, it's part of their story. And it goes side by side with their failures along the way - those are also a part of their story.
2. A humble person is genuinely interested in you. You can have a lengthy conversation with someone who is genuinely humble and find you know little about them. But they will know a lot about you, because they spent the time you had asking you questions, talking about your life, showing interest in your hopes and your struggles, maybe praying for you. They made you feel important, and they made you feel loved.
3. A humble person recognizes that they have received grace and they are deeply grateful for the God of grace who has loved and forgiven them. Humility and thankfulness seem to go together - being grateful is an important part of being emotionally healthy.
4. A humble person is secure in who they are. That doesn't mean overconfident or even outgoing. It just means that they aren't trying to prove themselves when they're with you; they're just relaxed and able to enter in to a conversation that focuses on someone other than themselves. One of the reasons God wants us to be humble is because He has provided for us eternal security and forgiveness for our sins, so we can be at peace with just being who He made us to be. He has given us the gift to know that we need to be forgiven and then meets that need through the sacrifice of Jesus - with needs met, we are secure.
5. A humble person never makes you feel like they are more important than you are, even if they are famous or successful. They see other people as being their equals, not as their rivals, and so are able to relate to them as they would relate to their friends.

You can see why I wish people would not have such a hard time thinking of someone they know who is humble. Because humble people are the nicest people to be with. They are genuinely interested in you, they let you talk about yourself and don't interrupt, they don't put on airs or ever make you feel stupid about something you've said, and they make you feel like you have their full attention. People who know they are nothing without the grace of God are people who can pour into your life - and you want them to!

Now, back to the New Testament and back to 1 Peter 5. Earlier I read verse 5 which contains the "one another" reference:

*All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'*

Let's read the verses that follow, verses 6 and 7:

*Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety upon Him because He cares for you.*

I want to point out four things that I think are important for us to recognize.

1. God puts the responsibility for humility on us - there is something we have to do: "Humble yourselves"
2. The second thing is that we humble ourselves under God's mighty hand. It is in submission to Him, in awe of Him, in reverence for Him, that we can truly be humble. Whatever it means to humble ourselves, it is something that is done in reference to who God is and what He has done for us.
3. Third, allow God to be your Promoter. You don't need to push yourself forward, to try to gain esteem or recognition. Let God be your publicity agent, let Him set the agenda for your life, so that He can lift you up in due time. At the right time, when He has done His work in your life, He will push you forward, He will open doors of opportunity for you, He will lay out the road before you that He wants you to walk in.
4. The fourth thing comes in verse 7 and it is the call to cast all our anxiety on God. I don't think it's a fluke that this comes right after the call to become humble. After all, it's our anxiety, our insecurity, our deeper fears, that cause us to act in ways that are proud, independent, self-assured. When we're trying to prove ourselves, it is because we feel some level of anxiety and Peter says to lay that at God's feet. "Don't be anxious," he says to us, "because God Himself cares about you. You don't need to prove yourself to anyone, to show yourself better than any other human being, because you are loved by your Creator and Redeemer. He is the one who gives you value and He will take care of you. Relax." And the fruit of God's acceptance and loving care is that we can walk in true humility with one another.

One more passage from Peter, this in chapter 3, v. 8:

*Finally, all of you live in harmony with one another, full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts and humble minds.*

Again, let's draw out some points from this passage:

1. It's written to all. There is not a special category of Christian that gets along with people, who lives in a harmonious and humble way - this is for everyone. "All of you live in harmony with one another," etc.
2. Notice the ingredients that make for harmonious relationships in the church: sympathy, love, tender hearts and humble minds. Be sympathetic, loving and tender-hearted - these are the ways we should respond to one another in all aspects.
3. But the big one for me is the one that points to our minds, our thoughts, the place where we make our judgments and accusations. In this place, we need to be humble and, again, that doesn't mean that we don't make a stand for anything or declare truth or call for repentance - it means that we don't place ourselves above others, as if we are more important or more deserving. In our mind, in our thought life, we need to consider others as just as important, just as worthy, as we think we are. To live in harmony is not an easy thing, because it actually does require humility, and the

humble attitude, the humble lifestyle, begins with the way we think about ourselves and about others.

When I teach the Perspectives Course with the theme of “The Story of His Glory” I talk about the importance of faith, and the importance of humility if we are truly going to bring glory to God. I tell the story of two humble sisters who spent their first two years as Christians planting 29 churches reaching tens of thousands of people -- and yet felt like they had done little compared to what Jesus had done for them. I tell the story of the birth of Jesus and the humble conditions He arrived in, with His birth attended by animals and reported by people generally regarded as thieves - the shepherds. I tell the story of the two worst kings in Israel’s history, Ahab of the northern kingdom and Manasseh of the southern kingdom and how God showed incredible favor to them when they humbled themselves before Him. I read to them from Isaiah where God is described as living in a high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite, humble. I tell them about the three passages that contain the same warning to the proud - from Proverbs, from James and from 1 Peter, where God is said to oppose the proud but give grace to the humble. I tell them about Nebuchadnezzar who praises God at the end of Daniel 2 and says that those who walk in pride, God is able to humble. And I close with Micah 6:8, which says these familiar words:

*O people, the LORD has already told you what is good, and this is what He requires; to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*

Humility is important to God. This is not some minor side issue that scholars and preachers can argue over until the Kingdom comes in fullness. This is the character of the believer, the one who follows Jesus. This is an area in which we should be growing, should be challenging each other, should be drawn towards because it draws us into the heart of God.

Some illustrations of humility:

Hudson Taylor was scheduled to speak at a large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia. The moderator of the service introduced the missionary in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as “our illustrious guest.” Taylor stood quietly for a moment and then opened his message by saying, “Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master.”

Someone once asked the singer Marian Anderson to name the greatest moment in her life and suggested four of the most likely candidates, events that illustrated the greatness of her talent and achievements. Her answer was that the greatest moment of her life was the day she went home and told her mother, “You won’t have to take in washing anymore.”

Although George Whitefield disagreed with John Wesley on some theological issues, he didn’t let those differences become divisive. Someone once asked the question, “Do you think you’ll see Wesley in heaven?” to which Whitefield replied, “I fear not, for he

will be so near the eternal throne and we at such a distance, we shall hardly get sight of him.”

On a visit to the Beethoven museum in Bonn, a young American student became fascinated with the piano on which Beethoven had composed some of his greatest works. She asked the guard for permission to play a few bars on it and, with a lavish tip, got a favorable response.

After playing the opening of Moonlight Sonata, she said to the guard, “I suppose all the great pianists who come here want to play on that piano.” The guard shook his head. “Paderewski (famed Polish pianist) was here a few years ago and he said he wasn’t worthy to touch it.”

Abraham Lincoln once got caught up in a situation where he wanted to please a politician, so he issued a command to transfer certain regiments. His Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, refused to carry the order out and called the president a fool. When Lincoln was told what Stanton had said, he replied, “If Stanton said I’m a fool, then I must be, for he is nearly always right.” When the two men talked, Lincoln quickly realized that his decision was a mistake and withdrew his order.

George Washington Carver developed hundreds of useful products from the peanut. He once said, “When I was young, I said to God, ‘God tell me the mystery of the universe.’ But God answered, ‘That knowledge is reserved for Me alone.’ So I said, ‘God, tell me the mystery of the peanut.’ Then God said, ‘Well, George, that’s more nearly your size.’ And he told me.”

Author Alex Haley has a picture in his office showing a turtle sitting atop a fence. The picture is there to remind him of a lesson he learned long ago: “If you see a turtle on a fence post, you know he had some help.”

Winston Churchill was once asked if he got a thrill out of the fact that wherever he made a speech, the hall was packed out. “It’s quite flattering,” replied Sir Winston. “But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big.”

Finally, from John Flavel: They that know God will be humble and they that know themselves cannot be proud.

And Peter wrote to the church still near its infancy:

*Finally, all of you live in harmony with one another full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts and humble minds.*