

Exalted In Humility
By Jason Huff
Psalm 25:4-11, 1 Peter 5:1-11, Luke 18:9-17

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Luke 18:9-17. Listen now to God's Word. "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Many things in Christianity seem noble to the outside world – love, kindness, peace. But humility is something that grates at human nature...it goes against something deep inside of us. Did you know that for every single book I found on humility on Amazon.com, I found 51 books on leadership? The top leadership books were 17th and 46th on Amazon's BestSellers List. The bestselling book on humility? It ranked at 2,705th. If you write a book on humility, chances are, your sales will keep you humble. In comparison, pride is everywhere. This week's big story was Evgeni Plushenko, the Russian figure skater who, after building himself up in the press, bitterly protested winning only silver. In his recent public statement, Tiger Woods admitted that his domination on the golf course made him feel entitled, that he was above the rules other people live by. We've heard similar stories from actors and actresses, politicians and presidents. But all of us suffer from the same problem. Some of us think that our intelligence or our cleverness or something else makes us unique, impressive, better than the next guy. Others of us focus not on how good we are but how we're not as bad as someone else. But both sides of the equation are driven by pride. That's what Jesus wants us to move past in today's lesson. We need to find our self-worth in God, not in ourselves.

In Jesus' parable today, there are two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector. This Pharisee is in a league all his own. He's standing by himself, separated from the rest of the people in the temple. He's probably standing near the Holy of Holies, the place where the Jews believed the glory of God dwelled. His prayer starts off just fine...he's thanking God. But then it all becomes about *him*. He's glad he's not like everyone else: thieves, evildoers, adulterers, tax collectors like the guy standing over there in the corner. He starts listing off his praiseworthy attributes. He fasts twice a week. In Jewish law, there were only a few times a year when fasting was mandatory, but this guy does it all the time to show how holy he is. He also tithes a tenth of everything he gets. Again, by Jewish law, many things were to be tithed, but some items didn't need to be. But this Pharisee is parading himself before God! It's like the Pharisee is saying, "See how good I am, God?" This prayer isn't really a prayer at all. It's not about God; it's about himself! The Pharisee says he's praising God, but he's really just praising himself.

The tax collector doesn't show any of that. In that day, you prayed with your face up, toward God, but he wouldn't do it in his humility. He stands far away from the center of attention. He beat his chest as a sign of contrition. Most importantly, he takes responsibility for his sin. In the Greek, the word before sinner is a definite article. He's not "a" sinner, one among many. The tax collector calls himself "the" sinner, the one responsible for his own misdeeds. This man isn't thinking highly of himself, but he's not absorbed with self-pity, either. He's totally honest with the reality of the situation...he's a sinner who needs God's grace. He's the one who goes home justified before God because he's the one who has been genuinely humble.

At first, it's hard to see how the second story in today's passage relates to the first. Families are bringing their babies to be touched by Jesus. The disciples rebuke them – can't you see that this is Jesus? He's an important man. He doesn't have time for infants! Jewish culture valued and protected children, unlike the surrounding Roman culture, and Psalm 127 calls children a blessing from the Lord. But in the harsh days of Jesus' time, they were often seen as burdensome, another mouth to feed, and certainly not worthy of the master's time. But Jesus says, "Let them come. The Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like little children. In fact, to enter the Kingdom of God, you have to receive it like a little child." His attitude is totally different.

We've heard this story used to encourage us to have children participate in our services and to teach them the good news of Jesus, and that's all true. This story is found in all the synoptic gospels. But the way Luke works it into His gospel shows us another side of things. Luke describes the children with the Greek word *brefe*, which means infants and toddlers. Luke is making a point: infants can't take care of themselves. They cry because they need help. Sometimes babies don't even know what they want, and the only thing they know how to do is to call out to Mom or Dad, and when Mom or Dad comes, they find love and comfort and everything they need. As we get older, we think we have a handle on things; we believe we're competent enough to drive a car, to get a job, raise a family. We believe we're responsible for what we become. And yet Jesus points to the helpless child as our example of how to accept the Kingdom of God...like an infant who reaches out for a parent, like one who knows in the simplest of faith the words of the old song "Jesus Loves Me" – "little ones to Him belong; they are weak but He is strong."

This week's lesson is still counter-cultural in our world. Our culture feeds on pride and self-promotion and proving one's self. We give jobs to those who have done enough; we give scholarships to those who have studied enough; we give accolades to those who have practiced enough; we give applause to those who sing high enough. We like self-made people. We teach our children to be confident, self-assertive, to have pride in themselves. What's the first question we ask when we meet somebody for the first time? "What do you do?" We define people by it. The Pharisee defined himself by his own self-righteousness. We often do the same thing.

But God doesn't want us to be defined by pride in our false sense of self. He wants us to find our worth in relationship with Him. As I look at this passage, I see a couple of simple things we can do to understand humility and find our true self-worth. The first is to realize the reality of our situation. The second is to recognize God's redemption and what it does for us. The third is to rejoice in response to God's work in our lives.

First, we've got to come to grips with reality, and reality isn't always what we think it is. I had strep throat this last week, and in my fever dreams, I believed wholeheartedly that I was an Olympic athlete. I also believed that I was part of a team of commando penguins. What I thought was true was proven wrong by the light of day. Sometimes what we take as being obvious is just wrong. That's what the Bible tells us about ourselves. It teaches us that sin has corrupted us completely. In Romans 3:9-12, Paul talks about how everyone is under the curse of sin. He says, "What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

In Philippians 3, Paul talks about why if anybody could be justified before God by their good deeds and upbringing, he could. Here's a sample of what he says: "If others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!...I was circumcised when I was eight days old...born into a pure-blooded Jewish family...I am a real Jew if there ever was one! What's more, I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. And zealous? Yes, in fact, I harshly persecuted the church. And I obeyed the Jewish law so carefully that I was never accused of any fault." In other words, if anybody was righteous of their own accord, it was Paul. If anyone could have prayed the prayer of the righteous Pharisee and been blameless, it was him. But then he continues: "I once thought all these things were so very important, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may have Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own goodness or my ability to obey God's law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith."

In fact, Paul doesn't leave it just there. In 1 Timothy 1:15-16, he says, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life." This man who by our way of thinking had every right to have pride in his religiosity considered himself the least of all – a sinner saved by grace.

Friends, we will get nowhere towards following God until we realize the reality of our position. Without God, we are nothing. We can do nothing apart from Him except sin. We cannot create the air we need to breathe or the food we need to eat. We can't make our own hearts beat or our brains tell the body what to do to keep alive another minute. Jesus said, "No one is good but God alone." All the good that we do comes from God's work within us. If we were raised right and taught to respect people and follow the law and do good things, that doesn't come from us either...it's another blessing from God. No one stands worthy before the throne of God. The greatest and most powerful, the smartest and brightest, will get to the Kingdom of God and find that their very best work, their very best thoughts, their very best good deeds, mean nothing. We can't earn salvation. We can't even make a dent in the sin debt we owe. At the judgment, we will find that every last human emperor has no clothes after all. The tax collector standing at the far end of the temple knew this reality. He knew there was nothing good in him, so he turned to God, the One who is truly good.

Thankfully, we can do the same thing when we recognize God's redemption. Once we come to grips with our sinfulness and shame, we can know that we have genuine value because of what God has done for us through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here's how Peter describes it in 1 Peter 2:9-10: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 5:8 – "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light." While in our sin and shame we were nothing, through what God has already done, we can become His true children. There is no longer anything to prove because we have nothing to prove. God is responsible for our salvation, and through His Son we are justified to come near to Him. We don't need to live in fear of our past deeds coming back to haunt us. In fact, we can live with real confidence, not in our weak human selves but in God's neverending love and grace. As God said to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." The tax collector, despite his weakness, went home justified before God!

It's OK to admit we are weak, that we've failed, that we can't make it on our own. We can also admit where we've succeeded, where plans have gone right, when we've played a good game or done a good job. We neither think too highly of ourselves nor too little of ourselves. In fact, we stop thinking about ourselves in general. We start giving God credit for it all. We praise Him for the gifts He has given us to use and we petition Him to work in us despite all our weaknesses. God's redemption means that we can get out of our self-centeredness. We can live lives of humility because we simply aren't that concerned about ourselves any more. Jesus said, "Those who want to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for my sake will save them." In humility, we are more concerned about what God desires than what we ourselves desire or even what others expect of us. No more worrying about who I should be or who I ought to be, about what this person or that person thinks of me, just a focus on the One who created me and gave His life for me and desires to be in relationship with me.

This leads us to the final bit: we rejoice in response to God's work in our lives. There is nothing like a young child who's being cradled in Mom or Dad's arms. It's peaceful and restful, a picture of protection and love. That's what knowing your place with God is like. When you turn to Him and put aside all the expectations and trying to be good enough, when you realize that you have nothing to give to God and just cry out to Him to save you, when He does it, it's the safest place in the whole universe to be. We can stop striving and stop proving ourselves and just be in His presence. We can stop looking down on others because we are all the same before God...all sinners in need of redemption, redemption that has been purchased through the loving sacrifice of Jesus the Christ.

When we worship, when we rejoice and sing out and praise God, when we serve others and show hospitality or give money to the work that God is doing or share the gospel with others, we do it as a response. We do it out of gladness. It seems like such a little change, but it makes a world of difference in the long run, and that key difference is knowing Jesus as our redeemer. One person does all they can to prove themselves worthy – to God, to other people, to themselves – and they may even do good things, but there’ll always be a God-shaped hole that no trophy or paycheck or medal or accolade can fill. Another person does what they do out of gratefulness to God, and that person will be the one to find fulfillment. They’ll be fulfilled because God is all they need, and He is always more than enough to satisfy.

This week, let’s start thinking about humility. The tax collector who knew the reality of his situation and cried out to God in his weakness and sin found himself strong in the Lord. Will we live the life of the Pharisee who looked down on others, or will we see ourselves in the homeless man and the vagrant, in the adulterer and the thief, and cry out for redemption? Will we turn inward to find our meaning and purpose, or will we turn to the One who made us to find them? May God bless us as we humble ourselves before Him and find in Him all we need.