

The Heart of the Humble

Psalm 131

--CEFC 9/2/18; 10/5/97; 8/6/89

Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12th century monk,
was supposed to have said
that humility is the mother of salvation--
and if it didn't, he should have,
because I think it's true.

Humility is one of those virtues that is for more often praised, than practiced;
And in fact, deliberately practicing humility can be dangerous;
it tends to make a person proud.

But there is no question that humility is richly prized by God
in the human beings he has created.

To reinforce this point, I would like us to read together
a selection of biblical passages that speak of it—

From the Old Testament--

- 2 Sam. 22:28 **Lord, you save the humble,
but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low.**
 - Isa. 66:2 **This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word.**
 - Ps. 147:6 **The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.**
- Prov. 3:34 **[The Lord] mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble.**
- Mic. 6:8—"He 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?"

The Gospels--

Matt. 18:4 **Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child
is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**

- Luke 14:11 **For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,
and he who humbles himself will be exalted.**

In the Epistles--

James 4:10 **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.**

- 1 Pet. 5:5,6 --

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

Paul--Eph. 4:2 **Be completely humble and gentle;
be patient, bearing with one another in love.**

Humility is important,
for the Bible says,
God saves the humble,
he esteems the humble,
he sustains the humble,
he gives grace to the humble,
and he lifts up and exalts the humble. /

If pride is the first and greatest sin--
then surely humility must be the queen of the virtues,
the mother of salvation.

But why should **humility** be so important to God?
Aren't there more important character traits that should concern him--
traits like honesty or generosity or thankfulness--
traits which we try so hard to teach our children?

"The reason why God is so great a Lover of humility," said one writer,
"is because He is the great Lover of truth."¹

For when you get right down to it,
humility is nothing but truth.
Humility flows out of the truth about ourselves
and the truth about God
as he has revealed himself to us.

Humility recognizes that God is God
and that we are not--nor should we try to be.

He is the Creator; we are all equally his creatures.
He gives the moral law; we must humbly obey.

We must each recognize and accept our place in God's world--
and not seek to overreach our bounds.

This is humility--
seeing the world as God sees it,
while pride is seeing it as I want to see it.
Humility springs from the truth;
pride from a lie.

Eugene Peterson, in his comments on this theme,²

¹ St. Vincent de Paul.

² *Long Obedience*, p. 147.

recalls the old story of Doctor Faustus
 which warns us of the folly of prideful impudence.

John Faustus became impatient with the limitations placed upon him
 in his study of law, and of medicine, and of theology.
 No matter how much he learned in these fields
 he always came up against something still greater,
 something that he couldn't supersede.

In law, Faustus was confronted by the notion of *justice*--
 that always stood over our laws.

In medicine, his efforts were frustrated by our ultimate *mortality*--
 that meant that death was inevitably
 the end of every person.

And in theology, he came face to face
 with the *awful reality of God*--
 standing over him, and beyond him—
 impossible to comprehend.

Dr. Faustus refused to submit himself to these higher realities.
 He would not serve them;
 he wanted to escape his own finitude.

So, he made a deal--a deal with the devil.
 By the powers of magic,
 he would be able to defy the laws of physics and mortality,
 to ignore the norms of morality,
 and to disregard the limitations
 of his relationship with God.
 And he could use this knowledge for his own purposes and pleasure.

But in exchange for this power,
 which was to last for 24 years,
 Dr. Faustus must sell his soul to the devil
 and be forever damned.
 He died a horrible death.

This is a tragic story that for generations
 has been told and retold by poets, playwrights, and novelists,
 warning people against the foolishness
 of abandoning the glory that is theirs
 as beings created in the image of God
 and embarking on a foolhardy adventure
 of trying to be God themselves. /

Now, it seems in our day, that Dr. Faustus has become a hero--
 a model of man come of age.

He's the man of ambition--
 getting ahead, whatever the cost.
 he's the man of vision--
 able to see beyond the limitations of our human mortality.
 he's the liberated man--
 refusing to be shackled by the constraints
 of some divine moral law.
 He creates his own morality.
 He is the authentic Self—
 always seeking to be true to himself,
 for he is accountable to no one but himself.

O, to be like Faustus!

But we dare not forget a fundamental truth
 which in the end, Faustus had to face--
 the truth that the devil will have his due--
 and his due is damnation.

For to live like Faustus is to live a lie--
 seeking to be what we are not./

It is in contrast to this arrogance of human pride
 that we come to the simple humility of David
 in our passage this morning--Ps. 131.

It's a simple Psalm--
 and its form seems to fit its theme--
 modest and reserved,
 unpretentious, easily overlooked.

But as C. H. Spurgeon commented--
 "it is one of the shortest Psalms to read,
 but one of the longest Psalms to learn."

For here in these words of David,
 we are given a glimpse of godliness
 in the heart of the humble.

Ps. 131--

**"My heart is not proud, O Lord,
 my eyes are not haughty;
 I do not concern myself with great matters
 or things too wonderful for me.
 But I have stilled and quieted my soul;
 like a weaned child with its mother,
 like a weaned child is my soul within me.
 O Israel, put your hope in the Lord
 both now and forevermore."**

At first glance, you might look at this psalm
 and think it should be titled:
 "Humility and how I attained it."

The writer almost seems to boast of his humble heart.

We have to be careful here,
 for humility is something that can easily be put on like an overcoat,
 and used with great effect--
 we can say the right words,
 strike the right pose--
 and fool other people, and even ourselves.
 As I said, practicing humility can easily slide into posturing and pretense.

You may know people who are very adept at this sort of thing,
 when it suits them--
 sometimes you just want to say to them,
 "Quit being so humble,
 you're not that great!"

You can usually sniff such hypocrisy out.
 In prayer, this kind of person describes himself
 as "the greatest of sinners,"
 but then he becomes deeply offended
 if you so much as criticize the color of his shirt.
 She says, "It's all for the glory of God,"
 and then she gets upset when she doesn't get the public recognition
 she thinks she deserves.

In fact, David here is not boasting of his humility,
 because this Psalm is not addressed in the first instance
 to us, the readers, at all.

It is addressed to God.
 David lays bare his heart
 in what is a confession of faith,
 and a prayer of his soul.

In the very process of proclaiming his humility,
 he is humbling himself before God.

"My heart is not proud, O Lord,
my eyes are not haughty--
 literally, he says, "my eyes are not raised up."

He assumes the posture of the tax gatherer in Jesus' parable
 who doesn't feel worthy even to lift his eyes toward heaven.

His eyes bow down, because he catches a glimpse of God's greatness.
 That's what tends to happen in authentic worship—
 the bigger God gets, the smaller we feel,
 which makes this psalm a particularly appropriate follow-up
 to our exposition of Psalm 29 last week. /

And notice what David says--

**"I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have stilled and quieted my soul;"**

David has renounced the arrogance of Dr. Faustus.

He has abandoned selfish ambition and arrogant grasping
and has resolved himself

to live within the restraints of his created condition.

He stays within his pay-grade as a human being before God.

Some find this very hard to do.

I'm reminded of the story of boxing champ Mohammed Ali--
who would never win awards for humility.

Ali was traveling once,
and the flight attendant on the plane
kindly asked him to put on his seat belt.

He balked at the order and said,
"Superman don't need no seatbelt."

The flight attendant wasn't fazed and responded,
"Superman don't need no airplane."

We are limited as creatures.

It is nothing but pride to think that
we can do **anything** and know **everything**.

We mustn't forget the truth of Dt. 29:29--

**"The secret things belong to the Lord our God,
but the things revealed belong to us
and to our children forever."**

It takes humility to recognize our limitations—

to know that God has secrets that we cannot conceive.

It takes humility to accept—

and to live in the light of—
the truth that God has revealed.

There are things we will never know;

questions that will never be answered.

Some aspects of the ways of God in the world

will always be beyond our comprehension.

It takes great humility to bow before God

and to recognize this truth.

**"I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have stilled and quieted my soul;"**

**"The secret things belong to the Lord our God,
but the things revealed belong to us
and to our children forever."**

This is not to say that we shouldn't seek
to stretch the limits of our knowledge wherever we can.
I think of our knowledge of the physical world, for instance.

I remember talking with a fellow who once attended our church
while he was working on a satellite project
that would measure radio waves
from farther in the distant reaches of the universe
than had ever been detected.

He was engaged in stretching the boundaries of human knowledge.
Yet in talking to him,

I knew that he recognized
that the ultimate secrets of the universe--
and its ultimate source in God alone--
are beyond detection by any scientific instruments.

Despite all the advances in knowledge in this century
we are still in the position of Isaac Newton,
the brilliant scientist of the late 17th century,
who said at the end of his life,

"I seem to have been only like a boy
playing on the seashore and diverting myself
in now and then finding the smoother pebble
or a prettier shell than ordinary
whilst the great ocean of truth
lay all undiscovered before me."

The Lord God is the Creator, the Creator of that great ocean of truth--
we are but his creatures--
and we must humble ourselves
before his majesty and power.

As the Lord asks Job--

**"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.**

Who marked off its dimensions?

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

Have the gates of death been shown to you?"

No, they haven't.

Job was silenced by such questions,
and so was David.

**"I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have stilled and quieted my soul."**

David bows humbly before the wonder of God.

So what does this Psalm say to us about our **ambitions**?

Shouldn't strive to know, to achieve, to accomplish new and greater things?
What would life be without that challenge?

Ambition can be difficult—

The biblical writers repeatedly warn against any form of “**selfish ambition**” (ἐπιθείας)—
that spirit of rivalry that jealously strives to put oneself above others.³

Much of our ambition can be driven by a quest for power and personal glory.

But ambition can also be positive, in the form of aspiration--

that impatience with mediocrity,

that hopeful striving for the best that God has for us--

ambition can be a virtue.⁴

There is such a thing as a godly ambition.

As Paul said,

“It has always been my **ambition**

to preach the gospel where Christ was not known” (Rom. 15:20).

Or in Phil. 3:14-- “**I press on toward the goal for the prize**

of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

But when we take God from the picture--

ambition becomes a tyrant rather than a servant.

Ambition can rule our lives,

taking the energies of God-honoring aspiration,

and turning them into a self-serving grabbing

for fame and fortune,

power and prestige.

Is God at the center of your ambitions?

I like the story of Charles Spurgeon,

who spent much of his early years in Cambridge, England.

In the 19th century, because Spurgeon was a Baptist and not an Anglican,

he wasn't allowed to attend the University there.

So, he applied to a Baptist college in London,

and was to have an interview with the dean

who was going to be in town.

For some reason, the man never showed up.

And Spurgeon recalled that as he walked home

across the park known as Jesus Green,

Jeremiah's words came to his mind--

"Are you seeking great things for yourself?"

³ See Gal. 5:20; Phil. 1:17; 2:3; James 3:14,16.

⁴ See Rom. 5:20; 1 Thess. 4:11, using φιλοτιμωμαι.

Seek them not" (Jer. 45:4).

And young Charles felt the strong conviction of the Lord
 that he was seeking placement in that college
 not to better serve the Lord
 but to serve his own ego.

He never pursued that degree.
 He gave up that ambition--
 because, he felt, that ambition for an academic credential
 got in the way of his aspiration to serve the Lord.

As he has said,
 "Many wishing to be great
 have failed to be good."

How many of our ambitions are driven more by pride,
 than by the pursuit of God's kingdom.
 Many a pastor has succumbed to that temptation, I'm sure of it.

Even churches can fall into this trap,
 Churches can strive to be known as the biggest or the best—
 the church everybody is talking about,
 a church that impacts the world.

But what does the Scripture say,
 "if my people, who are called by my name,
 will humble themselves and pray and seek my face
 and turn from their wicked ways,
 then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin
 and will heal their land" (2 Chr. 7:14).

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

In the words of Gary Thomas:
 "Dreams born out of our own ambitions can be demonic messengers
 disguised as angels of light.
 Dreams born in the heart of God can be precious motivators."⁵ //

Being a Christian means living our lives in truth--
living within the bounds of our created nature--
receiving what God has freely given,
understanding what God has revealed;
obeying what God has commanded.

**"I do not concern myself with great matters
 or things too wonderful for me.
 but I have stilled and quieted my soul."**

⁵ *Seeking the Face of God*, p. 138.

You see, there is a **contentment** in humility--
 in knowing the truth of who you are and who God is.

That contentment is reflected in this imagery used by the psalmist--

**"I have stilled and quieted my soul;
 like a weaned child with its mother,
 like a weaned child is my soul within me."**

Like a weaned child--

a child who no longer sees his mother
 simply as the means of satisfying his own desires,
 but one who now rests quietly by its mother's side;
 happy just to be with her,
 enjoying the warmth of her love.

This is the contentment that comes in humility--

as we put aside our prideful ambitions
 and come to our God, happy just to be with him.

We no longer need to worry about putting on a front,

trying to look good to other people—
 for it is God's view of us that now matters most.
 And he loves us as our Father just as we are.

This is the contented joy that comes through humble acceptance of the truth.
 For the truth is ultimately good news.

And it is with that thought
 that we come now to this communion table--
 and here, too, we find our contentment
 as we are humbled by the truth—
 gospel truth.

Here we see set before our eyes,
 the truth about ourselves
 and the truth about God.

This bread and this cup speak to us of that truth
 as it is revealed in the cross of Christ--
 and there is nothing more humbling than that.

First, the cross of Christ reminds us that we are sinners--
 for Jesus died on that cross because of our moral failure.
 All of us have rebelled against God.
 We have not obeyed him as we ought.
 It was you and I who killed the Messiah,
 and we deserve God's condemning judgment.
 It's not very flattering,
 but it's the truth.

Second, the cross of Christ reminds us
 that God is holy and righteous.
 Jesus' death points to God's wrath against all sin.
 He is a God who judges,
 and we are humbled by his absolute authority and judgment.

And, third, the cross of Christ reminds us
 of the immeasurable grace of God.

And that may be the most humbling thing of all,

There is nothing we can do,
 nothing in our power can make us right with God.
 God has done it all for us.
 All we can do is receive God's free gift
 of eternal life in Jesus Christ.
 We must come to him like a child.
 and become a weaned child—
 content to rest in the presence of our Savior.
 We must come to God on his terms--
 we must receive his love and forgiveness into our lives
 by faith,
 and by faith alone.

This is an offense to human pride—
 for our pride cries out for credit and self-justification.
 No wonder many find this gospel message of free grace
 impossible to accept.
 You must recognize the truth
 before you can come to this table--
 that means that you must be humbled.
 Maybe that's why humility is the mother of salvation.

Let's pray--

The first step to humility is to recognize that you are proud.

Can you recognize that?
 Do you feel yourself getting envious when others succeed?
 and secretly pleased when successful people fail?
 Do you feel irritated with people who always seem to be
 talking about themselves?
 and seem to have no interest in you?
 Do you feel you are entitled to God's blessings—
 convenience, comfort, good health,
 good relationships?
 Do you get upset when you feel that you are getting
 less than you deserve?

Do you have relationships that are strained at work or at home?
 Do you find it hard to give in,
 to give up the demand to have things done your way?
 Do you find it hard to forgive?

Let's take a few moments to humble ourselves before our God—
 we do this by reflecting on the truth.

The humility of faith--
 not understanding everything;
 realizing that you never will—
 for God is bigger than our feeble understanding--

The humility to accept what God has offered--
 esp. in the offer of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We thank you for the truth--
 may we be humbled by it.

and we come in wonder at your marvelous grace.

Words of Institution--

This Communion meal is for those humble enough
 to see their need of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ,
 and humble enough to profess that faith
 before God's people.

Glimpses of Godliness in the Psalms, #4
Sept. 2, 2018

Psalm 131— Humility

Humility has been called the queen of the virtues, the very mother of salvation. The Bible is full of its praises. Our psalm this morning is a simple one that even in its form speaks of the humility which pleases God and blesses its possessor.

I. Why Is Humility So Important?

**In contrast to the lie of human pride,
humility is a recognition of the truth.**

II. Humility Recognizes Our Human Limitations

III. Humility Keeps Ambition in Its Place

IV. Humility Provides the Way to Contentment

Discussion Questions:**The Heart of the Humble**
Psalm 131

- What does humility look like in a person's life? How would you recognize it in someone?
- Why is humility such an important quality in the eyes of God?
- How is humility connected to truth?
- What are your ambitions? What is the difference between godly aspirations and selfish ambitions?
- How is humility related to contentment?
- How does reflection on the gospel help us to grow in humility?