

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 30, 2014**

**WHAT GOD WANTS:
THE BLESSEDNESS OF HUMILITY**

Luke 18:9-14

Before I get into today's message, will you join me in expressing our thanks and appreciation to all our youth and youth leaders for leading us in worship today?

I realize it is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer that I am not a youth. Nor am I as youthful as I once was, long, long ago, in what seems like a galaxy far, far away. However, whether it counts for anything or not, I still remember some things from the years of my youth ... including what it was like to be able to grow hair on the top of my head, and to look something like this: (put on wig).

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Since almost the beginning of the year, we have been looking at the question: "What does God want?" in the light of Micah 6:8, which Julia just read for us before we sang the words as a song. Micah 6:8 identifies three things God wants us, His redeemed people, to do:

1. To act justly and to work for justice in the world.
2. To love mercy and to live a life of mercy and kindness to others.
3. To walk humbly with God.

Today I want to begin to explore with you what humility looks like and what it means to walk humbly with God, by looking at the story commonly known as "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican" (or Tax-Collector). You could also think of it as "The Parable of the Two Prayers" or "The Parable of the Two Prayers." True humility before God and its absence are both on display here.

Preaching on humility is a risky thing to do because I may give you the wrong impression about myself in doing so. I don't want to give you the impression that I think I'm qualified to preach on humility because I possess it. Nor do I want to give you the impression that I'm more humble than you are, or that I'm more humble than I am. Except that, if I'm honest, I do want you to think I'm more humble than I really am. I want you to think I'm humble, even though I'm not. Because we recognize humility to be a good and desirable quality, we have a tendency to be proud of our humility – that is, of the veneer of humility others see that hides our underlying pride. If we're honest with ourselves and one another, we know we all have a lot to be humble about. Actually being humble, though, and not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought (Romans 12:3) is a different matter.

So, please understand that I am not trying to hold myself up as a model of humility. I am all too aware of my lack of humility, which exposes itself in my desire to be thought of as humble. The supreme example of humility, of course, is Jesus Himself, the eternal Son of God who took on our flesh and blood in becoming a man, and then, as if the incarnation was

not humbling enough, “He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8) Nothing will ever be, or could ever be more humiliating than the Son of God being put to death on a cross. This is humility unequaled.

Now, to the parable, where Jesus presents a clear, dramatic contrast between humility and pride in the picture He gives us, on the one hand, of a Pharisee self-righteously boasting of his moral and spiritual superiority, to everybody else who isn’t a Pharisee like him; and, on the other hand, of a sleazy, greedy, manipulative, despised tax-collector who knows he is sleazy, greedy, manipulative, despicable, and utterly, completely unworthy to receive anything good from God, crying out to God for mercy.

In one corner, you see in the Pharisee the epitome of self-righteousness, the incarnation of self-exalting, self-promoting pride in one’s own righteousness, and the deceitful poison of that conceit that prompts a person, or a group, to look down on others. They see themselves as better than everybody else. They take pride in being better than everybody else. And they look down their noses with contempt at everyone who doesn’t demonstrate the same kind of passionate devotion to the Jewish law and religion that they model. This Pharisee is recognized as a paragon of virtue in the community. He is a man whose moral and religious credentials are impeccable. And, as we see in his “prayer,” he is not shy about letting God – or other people – know what a good, devout, upstanding man he is, and how worthy, how deserving he is of the admiration and emulation of others. He is happy, more than happy to put himself on a pedestal.

Ostensibly, this Pharisee has come to the temple to pray. No doubt he is tirelessly diligent in carrying out this religious duty. While Jesus says that both the Pharisee and the tax-collector go up to the temple to pray, it is apparent that the Pharisee isn’t there to pray as much as to give the appearance of praying while broadcasting his righteousness to everyone in the temple. In effect, he tells God how “lucky” God is to have such a virtuous, devoted follower. He thanks God that he is not like others whose sins are universally recognized and condemned. He brags about how pious he is. As far as obedience to the letter of the law is concerned, he considers himself faultless – just as Paul admits he did, before Christ appeared to him on the way to Damascus and revolutionized Paul’s life. Paul writes of his credentials as a Pharisee in Philippians 3, and then describes the difference knowing Christ has made in his life. He says: “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have (let go of) all (these) things” (Philippians 3:7-8). Everything he once held dear and built his life upon, Paul says, is worthless when compared to the treasures of grace and the fullness of life he has found in Christ.

Egocentric pride, however, permeates the “prayer” of the Pharisee. His “prayer” is all about him. He says “I” this, “I” that, “I, I, I” – five times in the span of two verses. What he does in the temple is more like posing than praying. You know how football players strike a pose after scoring a touchdown or making a big play? The way a home run hitter in baseball may stand and pose after hitting a prodigious blast? Or the way celebrities pose on the red carpet before the Oscars, Golden Globes, and other awards ceremonies? They do it because they

love the attention. I don't think there was a red carpet in the temple, but if there had been one, you would have found this Pharisee there.

The Pharisee approaches God and “prays” with a heart full of pride, not realizing, it seems, that pride is deeply offensive to God. It is an obstacle to real fellowship with God, a barrier to justification before God. Justification, of course, is a legal term that means being declared “not guilty” – declared righteous – in the sight of God. As long as you take pride in your own righteousness and trust in it to be made right with God, you, like this Pharisee, will never be justified before God.

One Bible commentator (Warren Wiersbe) suggests that this Pharisee is deluded in several ways. He is deluded about prayer, using it as a means of getting public recognition rather than a spiritual practice to deepen his relationship with God. He is deluded about himself, thinking he is righteous because of his devotion to the law when he is not. He is deluded about how to be accepted by God, thinking it is all based on his performance. And he is deluded about the tax-collector as well.

The tax-collector, in the other corner, is under no delusions of grandeur, no delusions of righteousness or worthiness of any other kind. What he knows is that he is a terrible sinner in desperate need of God and His mercy. There is no posing or posturing or pretense on the part of the tax-man. Unlike the Pharisee, he does not stand in the spotlight and draw attention to himself. He stays in the shadows, feeling the weight of his sinfulness and unworthiness before God. So great is his sense of guilt that he cannot even lift his eyes toward heaven as he prays. He beats his breast as a way of showing his sorrow and repentance. He has no righteousness, no *anything* in himself with which to commend himself to God. He comes to God with a humble heart, acknowledging that he is a sinner, crying out to God to have mercy on him.

The end of the story, as Jesus tells it, would have come as a total shock to those listening to it, a stunning reversal of what they expected to hear. In their self-righteous pride, they think to themselves: “Well, of course, the Pharisee goes home justified before God because of his own righteousness. No question about it. But there is no way this dirty, rotten scoundrel of a tax-collector can ever be justified until he cleans up his life and starts living the way we Pharisees do.”

But Jesus tells them it is the tax-collector, not the other man, who goes home made right with God. It is the tax-collector whose humble plea for mercy is accepted by God. “If you exalt yourself,” Jesus says, “you will be humbled; and if you humble yourself, you will be exalted” (18:14). Or, in the colorful language of *The Message*, “If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face”

Pride, as we have already said, is offensive to God. The Bible says that “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). Remember this truth, friends. Don't ever forget it. Commit it to memory. Remind yourself of it. Remind one another of it. “God has had it with the proud” (1 Peter 5:5, MSG). “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Pride cuts us off from God and His grace. Pride shuts off the flow of grace in

our lives. Pride makes us blind to our need for God. Pride causes us to think we are self-reliant instead of God-reliant. It deceives us into believing the lie that we are self-sufficient. Pride blinds us to our dependence on God at all times for all things, and especially for the gift of salvation that brings forgiveness of our sins, freedom from the power of sin and guilt, peace with God, adoption into God's family, and the assurance of eternal life beyond death in the kingdom of God. God is opposed to the proud. But He gives grace to the humble. He gives grace to those who humbly admit our need.

Self-exalting, self-righteous pride offends God. He hates it with a passion. But He takes delight in the humility of heart that causes us to trust in Him and Him only to make us right with Him and to fit us for heaven.

Do you know the dictionary definition of *humility*? If you look up *humility* in your online dictionary, you're likely to come up with something like:

- “the quality or condition of being humble;” (Isn't that helpful?)
- “a disposition to be humble;”
- “a modest or low view of one's own importance;”
- “a lack of false pride;”
- “the quality or state of not thinking you are better than other people.”

In some respects, maybe it is easier to define humility by what it is not. The opposite of humility is arrogance, pride, conceit, egotism, and hubris.

As for the word *humble*, it too is often defined by what it is not. Dictionary definitions include: not proud, not arrogant, and not thinking of yourself as better than other people. Thinking of yourself as better than other people is a deadly trap to be avoided at all times because, in fact, you are not better than other people. Neither am I.

Anyone who tries to impress you by showing you how humble he or she is, doesn't know the true meaning of humility. Jane Austen wrote in *Pride and Prejudice* that “nothing is more deceitful than the appearance of humility.”

Anyone who presumes to be immune to the perils of pride is in more danger than they realize. Charles Spurgeon tells of being approached by a woman who said she had always prayed that he would be kept humble. Spurgeon thanked her, and then said: “But do you not need to pray the same prayer for yourself?”

“Oh no,” she replied, “there is no need. I do not think there is any tendency in me to be proud.”

Spurgeon told the good lady he thought it most necessary to pray such a prayer for herself, for as sure as she thought she had no tendency to be proud, it proved she *was* proud already. Says Spurgeon: “We are never, never so much in danger of being proud as when we think we are humble.”

What does God want? In addition to doing justice and loving mercy, God wants us to walk humbly with Him. To walk humbly with God involves knowing who God is and who you are in relation to Him. It involves recognizing that He is Lord and you are not. It involves a recognition of God's holiness and our sinfulness; His sovereign power and love, and our radical dependence on Him; His bigness and our smallness. You can't walk humbly with God if you think God is "lucky" to have someone like you on His team.

Humility is so important that Paul includes it in the wardrobe of the Christian life. In Colossians 3:12, he urges us to clothe ourselves with such qualities as compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Peter echoes the same thought in 1 Peter 5, telling us to "clothe (ourselves) with humility toward one another." Why? "Because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." We are to "humble (ourselves), therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift (us) up in due time" (1 Peter 5:5-6) – which means, in His time, not ours. And for His glory, not ours.

Dear friends, clothe yourselves with humility toward God, with humility toward one another in the body of Christ, and with humility toward all people everywhere.

If you would go home justified before God today, put away every thought of self-reliance and self-righteousness, and let the attitude of your heart be like the tax-collector who simply and sincerely cried out to God for mercy and forgiveness. With thankfulness for the gifts of His mercy and grace, walk humbly with God.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.