

“Humility”

Deuteronomy 8:1-18; Philippians 2:1-13;
Matthew 5:5; Luke 14: 1, 7-14

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The word “humble” is a word that we may have mixed feelings about. It’s not one of those things that we immediately say, “Yeah, that’s what I want to be. What I want to be when I grow up is humble.” Today it often feels like humility is not a central value of our society. I feel like I am often encouraged instead to think about how I get ahead, how I promote myself, how I think about my own success, often thinking about others as people I have to compete with or struggle with to get there.

If you think about it in terms of the passage I read from Matthew, which is often translated “meek” instead of “humble,” it feels like it is even more of a struggle. We’re supposed to be strong, not meek. We’re supposed to be in charge, if nothing else, of our own lives. And yet, we hear this invitation to be humble.

We recognize that Jesus, when he came, engaged in an act of humility. I don’t know if you appreciate it or not, but it feels a little awkward. When he became human, he humbled himself to become a servant. That almost feels like it suggests that to be human is to be a servant. That’s not always the way I want to think about my own humanity. We certainly recognize that while Jesus saw that grasping and trying to hang onto being equal to God was not something that he wanted to exploit, but he was willing to humble himself, and come and be among us, and learn what it means to be human, and learn what God has for him to do and to be obedient to him.

We have this little story—our founding story—that suggests that we tend to want to go the other direction. It happened in that pesky garden back there with Eve and the snake in it. The way the conversation went was, “You can be like God.” It wasn’t “you could be humble” that got Eve in trouble. It was “you could be like God.” And in wanting to be like God and not trusting in God, we see trouble coming. Then when God comes to talk with them in the garden, they hid themselves. Instead of being humble and coming and asking for forgiveness, they hide. Our founding story, in some ways, is of us wanting to be God, not to humble ourselves. Yet we see in Jesus this ability to humble himself, not only in this wonderful piece from Philippians, but when he goes and washes his disciples’ feet. That’s clearly a metaphor for being a servant to one another, for showing humility and caring.

Scripture presses this point in a number of ways. As I was looking for verses on humility, one of them I ran across was one that talked about Moses. This one talks about the people being humbled as they walked through the wilderness so that they could in some ways be open to learning from God. It was interesting that the end of that time was when they got the instruction—a time when they might have been humble enough to hear it. But the other piece I was amazed at was that we always look back at Moses as one of the most powerful leaders of the Israelites, and yet there was a verse that says that Moses was the most humble man in the world.

There is a sense that scripture is beginning to hold up this idea of humility as a quality that somehow enables us to know, and to be with, and to do the will of God. Yet

it seems so hard to recognize and begin to accept humility. So often it feels like I need to be in control of my own life, or to look around me and see what everyone else is doing so I can figure out how to fit in. As I begin to figure it out, somebody changes something. There's a new trend. I need to keep up with that trend. Somebody is pulling strings, because I react. Sometimes it feels a little jerky. Sometimes I feel like a jerk after I've done it. It's the idea that I can begin to allow the world around me to shape me and control me. I may not even realize it because I'm just trying to fit in. I'm trying to be like everyone else, or trying to be a little bit better than everyone else at the same thing everyone else is doing.

It seems to me that part of being humble is letting go. It's letting go of looking at what everybody else expects of me or thinks of me, and beginning to look to what God might want, to who I really am.

In Philippians it tells us, actually, to go to the point of regarding others as better than ourselves. I don't think that's written there to say that we should consider others better than ourselves because we should pay attention and follow exactly what they do. I think it means that we think of others as needing attention as much as or more than we do. There's a way in which everyone needs to be cared for, and loved, and encouraged, and supported, and invited into life. Oftentimes, that's not the mode we're in as we go through our days. We're not thinking about how others need to be invited into life. We're trying to figure out how to get through our own life. So there's this struggle, it seems to me, with this idea of humility and beginning to think about others.

It goes on in Philippians 2:4 to say "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." C. S. Lewis says it another way. He says, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." It's beginning to refocus where we're thinking. Not that we have to put ourselves down, but not to be so focused on self because so often it seems like what I'm told life is about is self. How do I get more for myself? How do I do this for myself? How do I get the care I need for myself? How do I find myself in the midst of other selves? Maybe there's even something freeing about letting go of always needing to put myself first and looking to the interests of others. To care about other people. To wonder what it means to invite friends, family, people who can't respond in the same way, into life.

I grew up believing or being taught somehow (and I'm not even sure how I learned this) that I was supposed to be self-reliant. I learned that I was supposed to take care of myself and that being able to do everything and not ask for help was the way I should be. I think I still struggle with that. I think I still have that tape running in my head and think that I should be able to do everything. I should be self-reliant. But even in that phrase we can begin to recognize, as we hear this idea of being humble, that I can't simply rely on myself if I'm humble. In self-reliance I have to be right about everything. I have to know how to do everything. I have to be the be all and end all. First of all, that's a trap that takes you into bad places. But in humility, we let go of that and find that in letting go we can begin to see things differently.

Jesus says it a little differently. He says, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." I think there was a certain time in my youth where I thought all I had to do was be humble and everybody would

find out how great I am. I think there's also a trap in thinking that humility means that everybody in society will find out how good we are. If you go on in the scripture, it doesn't actually say that society will find out at all. It might not be until resurrection that we find the full goodness of what it means to have been humble.

It might suggest also that we have something to be humble about. It's when we're doing some kind of good that we have something to be humble about. I keep trying to think of all the ways I think about what it means to be humble, so I wrote them down.

- I think humility comes with seeing one's own faults. Seeing my own self-reliance, the idea that I struggle with, is one of my faults.
- Thinking more about others than oneself.
- Learning not to promote oneself.
- Getting through that idea that we need to have selfish ambition and instead find a way to care for others—not, however, in a transactional way. If you notice when Jesus sat down at the table what he's talking about at the end is having a meal for people, don't always do it with people that you are just creating a transactional caring. If I do this for you, you'll do that for me. But how do I care for those who don't have a way to pay me back, do me a favor?

As we begin to think about what it means to be humble, we also recognize that it is a time when we are open to the work of God. In Psalm 25, verse 9, it says, "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way." There's another reason for being humble, a reason for trying to let go of thinking I know I'm best. It's because when I'm doing those things, it's hard to listen. It's particularly hard to listen to God. So when the Psalm says he leads the humble and teaches them his way, if we really want God to work in our lives, it's inviting us to start in that place of humility.

What I realize, however, is that as I talk about all of this, it's incredibly hard to do. Letting go of something like the idea that I should be self-reliant has been something I've been working on for years. How do we do it? As for most things, it gets to that very idea of humility. Part of it is letting go of thinking I can do it myself and instead recognizing I need to be anchored in God. I need to know that God is the one. I think it's hard to let go of comparing myself to everyone else if my value is all in what other people think of me. It's hard to let go of defining my success in particular ways and having certain expectations of myself if that's where I'm finding my value instead of finding my value in acknowledging that I'm a child of God. It is God's love for each of us and for me that is the base on which I can build my life, the anchor for who I am.

In Philippians, it also invites us to be in the fellowship of the Spirit, so there's this sense that as we do that we are given fellowship, not only with God's Spirit, but fellowship that is broader. It's a fellowship amongst us, with us.

Humility is not one of the most exciting topics we ever talked about, but it is one of the things central to what Jesus is inviting us to do and be. After all, blessed are the humble for they shall inherit the earth. Amen.