

The Grace of Humility

Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked,” is the defining statement of our fallen human nature. It gives us every reason to be humble, and, at the same time, it clearly explains why it is that we are not.

Humility is a precious commodity, but, sadly, it is rarely found among men and is too often despised when traces of it do appear. Let us consider humility carefully, therefore, looking at it not through the eyes of our misdirected culture, but as it is seen by God Himself.

The Lord our God requires His people to walk humbly before Him (Micah 6:8), and, because it is so exceptional to do so, such humility is often the first compelling evidence to be seen of a true and living faith in Christ. It is effective as a witness of Christ to others, as a means of correcting those who have taken a wrong path (2 Timothy 2:25), and as a way of increasing one’s own joy in the Lord (Isaiah 29:19). Does the believer find himself in trouble, burdened with grief, perhaps, or too anxious, worried and afraid to do anything? The Lord does not forget the cry of the humble (Psalm 9:12) but lifts him up (Psalm 147:6); indeed, He resists the proud and gives all the grace that is needed to the humble believer in order to see him through his trials and tribulations (James 4:6).

In contrast to that, consider what God reveals to us in His Word of the theology and practice of the Pharisees, both of which drained out of their unrestrained arrogance. Three things stand out. (1) The Pharisees saw themselves to be better than other people, wanted others to acknowledge that as well and to bestow on them special honours on account of it (see Matthew 23). (2) They were so impressed with themselves, the Pharisees believed they could work their own way into heaven and were fully deserving of that privilege (see Philippians 3). And (3) These Pharisees were so caught up in external behaviour, in how they lived on the outside and before men, that they never considered the condition of their own heart and how they appeared before God (see Romans 7).

Most people today would try to distance themselves from such an open display of arrogant behaviour, but is what we see now among unbelievers (including the self-appointed elite) really any different? (1) People still think of themselves as better than others, and that is why it is so common to encounter virtue-signaling.

(2) People still believe that they are deserving of God's favour, and that even if they are mostly *talk* (with little or no *walk*), they presume that they are surely worthy of going to that "better place" when they die. And (3) People still ignore the condition of their own heart, believing that their private corruption is not so bad, after all, as long as they can hide it with an air of public respectability, or even counter-balance it with a sufficient number of what they perceive to be good works. Add to that the self-esteem cult which is so popular today. We are told that it is wrong to think ill of ourselves, that happiness and fulfilment in life can come only from self-adulation. And what about the 'victims' of this world who are so easily offended? We are told that it is the fault of everyone else that they are not as content and successful as they themselves think they should be.

As you can see, we can point a ridiculing finger at the Pharisees of old, and we surely will, but a careful look at people living today in the twenty-first century does not reveal anything appreciably different. What we discover thinly veiled is that same "deceitful heart" which is still "desperately wicked."

Consider with me now, not the unbeliever living around us, but even the believer, the man or woman who professes faith in Jesus Christ. Are we not disappointed in what we repeatedly see here, too, and especially with ourselves when we find all the same inclinations in us? Do we ever put others down, for instance, in order to puff ourselves up? Do we sometimes do something which we consider to be worthy of special recognition and favour, something we think is beyond our reasonable service to the Lord? Are we so caught up with our public image and trying to impress other people, perhaps, that that takes precedence over our love to the Lord and devotion to do His will?

Maybe we just try to fit in – support the current trends, whatever they may be – and attempt by such means to buy our way into being approved by our neighbours. Paul said, "If I still pleased men" – as he did as an unbeliever – "I would not be a bondservant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). It is no wonder then that he wrote the Christians in Colosse to put off their old ways which continued to be an influence in dragging them down, and in their place to put on new ways, including "tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." (Colossians 3).

We have to understand in all this that concealing arrogance, or hiding it somehow behind a façade of good works, does not turn it into humility, and that our failing to spot the evidence of such arrogance even in ourselves does not mean that we are really humble after all. Humility is an entity unto itself, something quite the opposite of self-serving arrogance, and, if we have not been diligently putting on humility (along with all these other attributes Paul has mentioned), then it should be clear to us that it is an essential part of our wardrobe that we have not yet acquired.

Have you not been greatly affected yourself, believer, and very thankful for a clear demonstration of genuine humility which you have witnessed in someone else? Perhaps it was his self-deprecating attitude that drew you to him. Perhaps it was her willingness to deprive herself of something in order to provide something of value for someone else. It does not matter what it is. The point is that this was an overwhelming experience for you to witness; it was something that you found most appealing and in itself very humbling. Imagine that – being humbled by someone else’s humility – but, of course, that is the way it works, what makes true humility so effective, and another reason we should pursue it.

But how does one acquire the grace of humility? It does not spring up on its own – everything in our fallen human nature opposes it – and, since it comes from God, we will have to go to Him for it. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17), and humility is no exception to that rule. If you are an unbeliever, I plead with you by the mercies of God to commit yourself fully and without reservation to the Lord Jesus Christ. No one comes to the Father but by Him (John 14:6), and He is able to save to the uttermost those who do come to God by Him (Hebrews 7:25). As you look to Him, that one and only Saviour, “God shall supply all your need,” as He does for all His people, “according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19)!

If, however, you are a believer, and need only to be reminded again and constrained by all that you already possess in Christ, dear Christian, then keep “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2), and cry out to God for that humility which will make you more and more like Christ Himself. The Lord will be pleased by His sanctifying grace to give it to you; put it on, as Paul writes, and determine never to go anywhere at any time without it!

What undeniable testimony will this give to everyone around you that you, like possibly no one else they know, are clothed with humility? They will see it in your behaviour and hear it in your conversation. They will hear you confess with a sincere heart that you are the chief of sinners, and they will know that you mean it (1 Timothy 1:15). “How can we all be the chief of sinners?,” you ask. ‘In Adam’s fall, we sinned all’ – that is true, but when the eyes of faith are opened to the sinfulness of man, and to the grace of God in redemption, the sinner saved by such grace is overwhelmed by how undeserving he really is and cannot see himself in any other light than the very worst of men. It is an attitude, you see. Indeed, until he sees himself in this light, as the worst of men, he has not yet embraced the biblical view of who he really is. Yet, as a result of such a view, he will be moved to esteem others better than himself (Philippians 2:3,4), and so give them preference (Romans 12:10).

This new attitude of humility will serve, not only as a testimony to others, believer, but as a compelling witness to your own soul as well. You will see and feel your own change of heart, how it is that you are moved to love the Lord more than you did previously, how it is that you will want to serve Him more faithfully, effectively and with a zeal according to knowledge. You will also find that you are moved to love your neighbours as never before, even your enemies, and will consider their needs on a level with your own.

We hear a lot of talk these days about pride and arrogance, but it is not enough to discredit them; we need to pursue holiness, to be made over in a growing likeness to Christ, and to adorn our life and witness with humility. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who ... made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant. ... He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:5-11). If He who is very God of very God should give His life for His Church, believer, shall not we who are His people, the apple of His eye, present ourselves a living sacrifice to Him? Yes, believer, *a living sacrifice*, and that is our reasonable service (Romans 12:1)!

by Rev. Tom Aicken

