

“Living a Humble Life”

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus.

A number of years ago, there was a tendency in some of our schools, (I don't know if it's still happening today or not), to recognize the achievements of our children through the use of bumper stickers. (You know the ones.) “My child was an honor student at Lietz Elementary.” Or “My grandchild was student of the month at Dartmouth Junior High.” Or “My daughter was top in her class in mathematics.”

Now, I don't know about you, but I've always liked the idea of finding ways to encourage our kids, especially when they're young. We have a school here at St. Timothy's where, ever month in chapel, we recognize a few of the kids for some of the things they've done for others. We tie it to the theme for the year. (This year it's “Clothed in Christ.”) And we call them up front and give them a “Clothed in Christ” certificate. And it's a special time for those kids, with some real lasting value.

Pastor Jim told me that he was recognized when he was in school. He said he made the Dean's list. (He actually said the Dean had two lists.) What he didn't tell me was which one he was on.

There's nothing wrong with recognition. And who among us doesn't like to be recognized for what we've done. But when recognition is pushed to its extreme, when it begins to border on pride and conceit and building one's self up, and when somehow it gets tied in with our social standing and status among our peers, then it can easily (and quickly) become something about which to be concerned. And that's what today's story is all about.

“Living a Humble Life.” Let's talk for a few moments about humility. (We'll get to pride in a minute.) But let's start with humility. The word humble means “having a modest estimate of one's own importance; not proud; not large or showy or elaborate; not desiring to draw attention to one's self.”

For the most part, we'd have to say that humility is a good thing. Jesus, for example, told the story of the Pharisee and the publican who both went into the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanked God that he wasn't like the publican. The publican simply prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus said it was the publican and not the Pharisee, (the one who took a humble approach in his life) who went home (that day) justified and forgiven in God's sight.

And that's not the only place where the Bible talks about humility. All throughout the Bible we find passages encouraging a humble life. The writer of Proverbs says, “that when pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble there is wisdom.” The psalmist says, “The Lord leads the humble in what is right, and teaches those with humility his way.”

There's little doubt (as you go through the Bible) that humility is a quality after which we are encouraged to strive. Time after time we find stories of people whose pride was their downfall. Time and again, we find Jesus speaking against the dangers of pride and lifting up the importance of humility.

The trouble is that humility can be somewhat of an elusive quality. (Have you ever noticed that?) Even when we think we have it (firmly in our grasp), our pride has a way of working itself into the picture and pulling it away.

Maybe you remember the song by Mac Davis, (years ago), sort of a tongue-in-cheek reminder. He began with the words, “Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way.”

Now, maybe that's the extreme. I doubt if too many of us (here this morning) have to worry about the trouble of perfection. But the reality is that humility is not quite as easily achieved as we'd like. It's even been said that it's possible to be proud that you're humble.

In today's story, we find Jesus concerned about the lack of humility, (about the obvious and apparent pride) found in the lives of those with whom he was sharing a meal. As with last week, it was the Sabbath, and Jesus was invited to the home of one of the rulers of the Pharisees.

And what a gathering it must have been. Some of the most prominent, prestigious, important leaders of the day were all gathered together. And what a scrambling (for position) there was among the guests. For many,

this was the perfect setting to rub shoulders with the elite, to drop names in order to get ahead, and to scratch the backs of those with whom they wanted to make an impression.

But Jesus was not impressed. He was not impressed in the least. In fact, he was angry. He was upset. He was anything but pleased with what he saw. And so he (used the occasion) to tell a story, to warn them against seeking the highest positions, (the most visible places of honor), and rather, to choose for themselves the lowest places, the least obvious positions of recognition. “For those who exalt themselves,” Jesus says, “will be humbled, and those humble themselves will be exalted.”

“Living a Humble Life.” What does it mean for us, as followers of Jesus, to live humble, God-pleasing lives? Is there a secret to being humble, living as we do in a world filled with incentive for gaining status and recognition and prestige? I believe there is. And it starts with our relationship with God.

Go through the Bible sometime. In fact, it’s an interesting study, (if you were to go through from beginning to end) and pick out all of the passages that talk about the relationship we have with God and about the place (that relationship) is supposed to hold in our lives.

We’re to “love God above everything else” (the Bible says), “with all of our heart and our strength and our mind.” We’re to have “no other gods apart from him.” The number one priority in life, the single most important reason (you and I have) to live.

What a difference it would make in our world, if God were given his proper place, as creator, as sustainer, as the one who controls and determines and allows (and brings to an end) all of life. (Now, he holds that place. He’ll never give up his place.) But he’s not always given his place. What a difference it would make it in our world (if it were to happen). What a difference it would make (for us) even in the church, if God were truly given the place (in our lives) he deserves.

It’s an interesting study, all of the passages that speak about God being first and foremost in life. It’s also interesting how (if you were to do the same thing with passages that speak about our relationship with others), how interconnected the two become.

We’re to “love God with heart and strength and mind.” And we’re to “love our neighbor (Jesus says) as we love ourselves.” We’re to show our love for God by living out our love for one another. The God “we cannot see” (the Bible says) is loved “by caring for the neighbor we can.”

In the Ten Commandments, it’s the same thing. The first three deal with our relationship with God (first and foremost in life). The last seven deal with the relationship we have with our neighbor. Of all the commandments Jesus said, (and there were a lot) these two are the most important.

Now, put all of that together (relate it to the story today) and what do you get? Loving God above everything else? Putting our neighbor (and his or her needs) ahead of our own? Jockeying for position? Trying to make a show and impression for others?

My friends, there is no room for a false pride when it comes to the Christian life. There is no room for a fake pride when it comes to being a follower of Jesus. In fact, when it comes to pride, it’s a dangerous and a slippery slope. So much so that once you get on, (it’s almost impossible) to get off.

Now, as Christians (and we’ve talked about this before), there’s nothing wrong with being proud of what we’re doing. (Don’t miss the point.) There’s nothing in the Bible that speaks against being proud of who you are. As disciples of Jesus, there are all kinds of reasons for your being proud in the Christian life.

I’m proud (for example) of this congregation. I’m proud of the witness we are giving in this community. I’m proud of our school, and of our teachers, and of the things we’ve accomplished in the first three years of our 2020 Vision. I’m proud of the stance we’ve taken on some difficult issues. I’m proud of the fact that we’re not afraid to talk about church-body affiliation and about what that might mean for our shared life. There’s nothing wrong with being proud in the Christian life of who we are and what we’ve been called to do. Of whose we are and what we’ve become (and can become) in him.

But pride can so easily become that slippery slope, (hard to get off). And when that happens, not only can it do damage to the relationships we have with others, but it can also stand in the way of our relationship with God.

Pride has destroyed more marriages than any other single factor you could find. It's destroyed families. It's destroyed relationships at work. It's destroyed businesses. It's destroyed nations. It's destroyed churches. It can even destroy a person's faith. On every level, if it's not kept in its proper place, pride can destroy life.

But when God is placed first (and there's the key), given his proper place in life, and when the wellbeing of others is placed second, always looking out for what's best for the neighbor, then there's nothing of which to be afraid.

And so how does it happen in the Christian life? (Let's get practical for a few minutes.) How do we stay humble in our relationship with God and with others? (Because it's not something that comes naturally for most of us.) And it's certainly not automatic.

If we're going to do it, we'll need some help. And not just some help (in general), but some help from the one who humbled himself for us.

And so, before closing today (very quickly), let me give you three simple ways to live the kind of humble life God is calling you to live. Here's the first, (number one), follow the example of Jesus. (Follow the example of Jesus.)

Now, there are many places (in the Bible) we could look to find examples of how Jesus humbled himself in life. Washing his disciple's feet, reaching out to those in need, serving those who had nothing in return to give.

Do you remember what Paul says about Jesus, and about the example he's given us in life? In his letter to the Philippians, chapter two, he says, "Have this mind among yourselves (he says) which is yours in Christ Jesus. Who though he was in the form of God...he humbled himself, became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

Now, do you know what we call that theologically, (Jesus coming to this earth as one of us)? We call it his "humiliation" (his humiliation). Not in a degrading way, but in an uplifting way. Not in a way that limited what Jesus could do with his life, but in a way that allowed God the Father to use his life. Jesus humbled himself. He became one of us. He gave up his godliness and became a man.

Now, do you know what that means (practically)? It means Jesus was seated at the head table. He had the place of honor right next to God. But rather than sit there and enjoy it, he gave it up. He walked away. He took off his tux and became a waiter, (a servant), all the way to the cross. He humbled himself. He went from as high as you could get to as low as you could go. And he did it for you and for me.

If you want to learn humility, learn what it means to set aside the kind of pride that can destroy life, a good place to start is by looking to Jesus. He's our example. He's the model. He's the one after which we've been called to emulate and to follow.

Start by looking to Jesus (as your example), the one after whom you're to pattern your life. From there, remember the place you already have. (Remember the place you already have.)

My friends, don't ever forget that you've already been exalted. You already belong to God. Now, I know we know that. (You know that.) But we have a tendency to forget it. (Don't forget it.) You're his child. You're eternally precious and valuable to him. Because of Jesus, you already have a place of honor. How much more exalted do you want to become?

You tell me. Who are the ones (more often than not) in this life who need to brag and to boast and to blow their own horns? Are they not the ones who are also the most insecure, who (deep down) don't feel much value and self-worth?

So what if I have to compromise in an argument with a friend? So what if I have to swallow my pride and admit that perhaps I do have something to learn? So what if I have to say 'I'm sorry' or (God forbid) 'I was wrong?' Does that change my place and position in life (before God)? Of course not. (And why not?) Because the place and position you have before God isn't based on your life, but upon the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. And that will never change.

Look to Jesus as your example. Remember the place you already have. And ask God's Spirit for help.

Honestly, I think one of the reasons so many of us have so much trouble in this area of life is that we try to do it on our own. (And how ironic.) Even in trying to be humble, we let our pride stand in the way of asking for help. But the truth is that we need the help, and we have the help. And it comes through God's Holy Spirit.

You remember the list. It's the fruit of the Spirit. It's "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control."

Now, when you think about it, all of those are qualities of a person who is humble. All of those are characteristics of one who is not trying to exalt (him or herself) at the expense of others. With the Holy Spirit (working in our lives) the fruit begins to grow. And when that happens, we actually begin to take on the kind of humility that was modeled for us (in his life) by Christ.

My friends, (in closing) I don't want it to sound too simple, because it's not. But it's time to get practical in living a humble life. And it's not as difficult as it might seem. Look to Jesus (as your example). Remember the place you have (you've already been exalted by Christ). And ask God's Holy Spirit for help. Unless, of course, (that is) that you're too proud to even try. Amen.