

CHRISTIAN HUMILITY

Dear Friends in Christ,

The story you are about to hear is true. One day a young high school student came home with a T-shirt that read, *"It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am."* Now you've probably heard that saying or seen it printed somewhere before. And it sounds like something a high school student would wear on a T-shirt. But you see, this incident occurred over 45 years ago, and T-shirts THEN didn't say what T-shirts say NOW. In fact this "It's hard to be humble . . ." shirt caused quite a stir back then.

The young man's mother was shocked! She said, "You're not going to wear that shirt out in public, are you?" Before the young man could answer, the question was turned into a statement. "You're NOT going to wear that shirt out in public! It's a terrible shirt. And besides, the message isn't Christian." "What do you mean," the boy asked, "not Christian? All it says is 'It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am.'" "Don't you know," his mother said, *"God resisteth the proud but giveth grace to the humble."* And *"Pride goeth before the fall."* Two days later this young man wore the T-shirt to school anyway, under his sports shirt. The T-shirt got a big response in the locker room before football practice, so he decided to wear it during practice underneath the shoulder pads and practice jersey.

Well, it just so happened there was an accident that day, an injury on the practice field. This same young man suffered a dislocated shoulder and was rushed to a nearby clinic in a lot of pain. "It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am" his shirt read, but right then and there he didn't feel very great at all. As the nurse's stainless steel scissors cut through the brand new T-shirt to remove it, all he could think of was the passage quoted by his mother. *"Pride goeth before the fall."* Was this a coincidence or was it divine intervention? After all, *"God resisteth the proud but giveth grace to the humble."* As the young man was leaving the clinic with his arm in a sling the nurse asked him if he wanted to take home what was left of the shirt. I said, "Throw it away." I never even wanted to see that shirt again, let alone wear it.

Humility - genuine Christian humility, is our topic today along with its antithesis - pride, sinful, selfish pride. Luke 14: 1 sets the stage for today's lesson on humility and pride.

*¹ One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee,
he was being carefully watched.*

Jesus had been invited to a Sabbath Day dinner party by an influential Pharisee, one of the important and powerful religious leaders of the day. Even though the Pharisees openly opposed Jesus and questioned his teachings, Jesus accepted the invitation. This invitation was not an act of kindness toward Jesus. It was really a trap. The Pharisees wanted to catch Jesus in a misstatement or a misdeed. They wanted to discredit Jesus, to expose a false teaching, and specifically to catch him breaking one of the many Sabbath rules. So they carefully watched his every move, carefully listened to his every word.

The first thing Jesus did was heal someone, a man who couldn't walk . . . even though it was a Sabbath Day . . . even though he was surrounded by Pharisees. Jesus healed the man and sent him on his way. The Pharisees took notes. They shot looks at one another, rolled their eyes, but said nothing.

When it was time for the meal, Jesus noticed something. He observed how the other guests pushed and shoved to get themselves seated in the main room, at the right table, with the most prominent people. The Pharisees were known for this. They loved the places of honor at banquets. They loved the most important seats in the synagogue. They loved making a “public show” of the fact that they were so religious. But do you see what’s happened here? Jesus was brought to this place to be observed. Instead, he became the observer, and what he observed was pride and selfishness and conceit.

So he told them a little parable. He said, “Imagine a large wedding banquet with many guests.” (Just like today, the more prominent the guest, the closer to the head table he or she would be seated.) Anyone who enters the wedding banquet hall and sits down near the head table, where the bride and groom and their families are seated, might end up publically disgraced. Imagine how embarrassing it would be, as the banquet is about to start, and the host has to ask the person to get up and move to a lower table to allow someone more important to be seated in the seat he had occupied. How humiliating to be told, in front of all the other guests, “You’re not good enough to be sitting where you’re sitting, so move it.”

This was a practical lesson even for the proud hearts of the Pharisees. Next time you enter a wedding banquet hall, seat yourself in the lower ranking seats, the seats with less prestige. When the host sees you sitting there he’ll ask you to move to a higher seat, a seat with more prestige. And this move, in front of all the other guests, will be a real compliment. That’s probably all the Pharisees got out of this parable. If they applied it at all in their lives it was probably in the following manner. Exercise a little “false humility.” Seat yourself way down at the bottom of the heap, and then you can lord it over those with whom you’re seated when the host asks you to move to a better position.

These words would have remained little more than an understated, veiled criticism of the Pharisees if Jesus hadn’t added verse 11. *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.* This verse expresses a truth not only in your relationship with others, but also in your relationship to God. *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

Pride was a problem for the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. That’s why Jesus spoke to them about humility. It is pride that hindered their faith, their acceptance of Jesus for what he was. They just knew they were special. They knew they were God’s chosen people. They knew a Messiah was coming to save them. And they expected big things. They expected a great earthly king, a powerful leader, someone who would raise Israel up to be a world power. Since they were the religious leaders of their people, they counted on having prominent places in the new government and in the new dominant society.

In their pride, they despised a Messiah as humble as Jesus. This Jesus of Nazareth had no wealth, no prestige, no army, no power base. All he had were the clothes on his back and a rag tag band of followers. What a insult to their pride that this humble teacher could be THEIR Messiah, THEIR Savior. Their refusal to listen to Jesus was the result of spiritual pride.

Even today spiritual pride is a problem for many unbelievers. Many people just can’t see that they NEED a Savior from sin. When you say ‘sinner,’ they think, “Yeah, like Adolf Hitler or Charles Manson or even Jodi Arias, but not me!” “I’ve never done anything really wrong.” “I’m basically a good person.” “I certainly don’t need forgiveness.” “I certainly don’t need a Savior.” Know anybody like that? . . . can’t see the need for a Savior . . . think they’re doing OK on their own? That’s spiritual pride.

The Bible says there's not a person on the face of this earth who is not infected with sin. *All have sinned.* (Romans 3:23 NIV). Sin is not just genocide, or mass murder or even a cold-blooded killing. It's also bad thoughts, hatred, anger, lust. It's also evil words, words meant to hurt someone or degrade them. It's any deed done in defiance of God or his word. All of these bad thoughts and evil words and defiant deeds earned us eternal condemnation. In our natural state (as we are born into this world) we could all appropriately wear T-shirts that say, "It's hard to be proud when you're as great a sinner as I am."

Thanks be to God, we are not doomed to eternal death because of our sins. As the Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2: ⁵ . . . *Christ Jesus . . . ⁷ . . . made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!* Now that's true humility! *he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!* And by that act of humility the penalty for all our sins has been paid in full.

But you see, spiritual pride and arrogance find this message hard to accept. Our human pride wants to think that somehow - our salvation depends (in part or in full) on something in us, or something we do, or something we are. But God says, ⁸ . . . *it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.* (Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV). Faith alone is what saves you, faith in Jesus. And that faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the gift of God. Faith is first and foremost humble recognition that on your own you are lost, and that only through the work of Jesus can you have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

It was pride and conceit that brought down the Devil. (1 Timothy 3:6). And pride is one of the weapons in the Devil's arsenal that he likes to use the most. Think back to the temptation of Adam and Eve. The Devil appealed to their pride first, "God doesn't have your best interests in mind. He's trying to keep something good from you, something you deserve, something you ought to have." Then the Devil appealed to their pride again. He said, "Eat this and you will be like God!" Their pride wouldn't let them pass it up.

The Devil still uses the weapon of pride with us today, yes - even among believers. Pride, in its simplest form, is thinking of yourself as more important than others, more important than you really are. It has been said that pride is a disease which makes everyone sick except the person who has it. I have been an observer of marriages and a counselor to married couples for many years. I have seen pride as one of the biggest obstacles to overcome in achieving the happiness and harmony God intended for marriage. Sinful, foolish pride doesn't allow you to admit you're wrong. Sinful pride doesn't allow you to ask for forgiveness. Pride insists on having things your way. Pride looks out for your interests first.

Pride is one of the Devil's most useful tools. Pride shows itself even within our churches. It is pride and selfishness that manifests itself as unfriendliness, coldness to all you don't want to bother to get to know or even bother to welcome to church on a Sunday morning - avoidance of strangers, people who look different or dress differently. It's pride that keeps many from volunteering to serve in some capacity here at church. "Not me! I need my free time for myself." It's pride which says, "This is my money, my wealth. I worked hard for it. Let someone else support all the ministries of the church. I've got to think about taking care of myself first!"

Pride shows itself in our churches in subtle ways. Ever get upset when your special donation, your hard work, your dedicated service didn't get what you think is PROPER RECOGNITION? That's pride at work. Ever get upset when you didn't get the credit or the acknowledgment you thought you had coming? That's pride. Spiritual pride can attack your very faith. It is pride which says, "I was born and raised in the church. I've been a member all my life." And then concludes, "I'm a good Christian. I don't need to go to church EVERY week. I don't need to have daily devotions or regular Bible study. I don't need to go to the Lord's Supper all the time. I'm a good enough Christian just as I am."

It is pride that refuses to agree with the clear doctrines and teachings of the Bible. It is pride that says, "I don't like this teaching, it doesn't make sense to me so I'm not going to believe it." It is pride that refuses to accept the authority of God's word. "That rule puts me in a bad light. So that rule doesn't apply to me. I'm above that!"

Here's the good news. Not only did Jesus pay for our sins of pride, every one of them. It is Jesus who gets us out of the pitfall of pride. He says, "*. . . everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*" Jesus is our example of humility. Remember, He "*. . . did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom . . .*" (Matthew 20:28 NIV).

Humility is hard to come by. Once you're aware of it, once you think you've got it, you're actually starting to lose it. When someone boasts to me, "I'm a humble guy" I hear pride, not humility. Humility is hard to pin down. Humility is not so much thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less, and thinking of others more.

Genuine Christian humility is a fruit of faith. Only a believer in Christ can have genuine Christian humility. Colossians 3:12 *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.* As you grow in your faith, as the Holy Spirit strengthens your faith through God's Word and the Sacraments, you will desire more and more to clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. And as you grow in your faith, you will have the strength to clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience - who does that describe? That's a description of Jesus. Genuine Christian humility begins with a life that, through faith, seeks to be more and more like Jesus. Amen.