

## **What the Heck is Humility Luke 18:9-14 Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner**

Humility is not particularly well understood in our current day. This became clear back in July when a highly visible political candidate said, "I am actually humble. I think I'm much more humble than you would understand." This becomes most confusing when we consider these words of German Reformer Martin Luther who said, "True humility does not know that it is humble. If it did, it would be proud from the contemplation of so fine a virtue." It seems like this might make it impossible for someone to declare they are humble.

If we are to weigh anyone's claim to be humble we must start by asking what the heck is humility? Well, Miriam-Webster dictionary tells us that humility is "the quality or state of not thinking you are better than other people." Jesus illustrates this well in his parable about two men. One a Religious Leader - a well-respected Pharisee, the other a tax-collector, someone who is collecting money from his fellow Jews on behalf of Rome - the occupying oppressors. It would be hard to find two people who would better illustrate what the culture thought of as the best and the worst. Jesus knows that his listeners have an expectation about who is going to do the right thing, but let's see which one is humble.

In his prayer the Pharisee starts right away with Thanking God. This seems very appropriate until we notice for what he thanks God? "I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector." So, our Pharisee, a thoroughly observant Jew, a highly respected professional, thanks God that he is better than other people. His time of prayer and devotion starts by putting himself on the bell curve and celebrating that compared to other people, he is very good. It is pretty obvious that our Pharisee fails the Miriam-Webster test, he certainly is not humble.

What about the tax-collector? Well, here is his prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Not long, not eloquent and the first thing we notice is he makes no mention of any other person in his prayer. He stays focused on his own life, and he takes a realistic look at who he is and realizes that he needs God’s grace. Jesus affirms that this man passes the Miriam-Webster test of humility.

The tax collector reminds us that one pre-requisite for humility is honesty. We must be able to see ourselves with clear eyes. Modern Mystic Richard Rohr affirms this when he says, "It's not addition that makes one holy but subtraction: stripping the illusions, letting go of pretense, exposing the false self, breaking open the heart and the understanding, not taking my private self too seriously." I have struggled in life with not being honest with myself. This is based in my own insecurity, which ironically made me constantly cover up any lack or anything I did not know or understand. I spent much time trying to convince the world that I knew what I was doing. and as a result never really asked for or got the help I needed. We must be honest about who we are and work on becoming our true selves, not who we think others want us to be, in order to achieve humility.

Now I am not suggesting we need to beat ourselves up about this. We are humans, we each have wondrous and glorious abilities and we each have character flaws and things with which we need help. We get into trouble when we enter into the game the Pharisee played which is “am I better or not better than you.” Feminist theologian Letty Russell talks about our culture instilling in us a “one up - one down” assessment system when we meet people. Am I higher up the pecking order than you, and I richer, smarter, more eloquent, stronger... whatever scales we use, our culture seems to constantly push us to assess others, to judge others and to base our self-worth on our assessment. Henri Nouwen once wrote "As long as we continue to live as if we are what we do, what we have, and what other people think

about us, we will remain filled with judgments, opinions, evaluations, and condemnations. We will remain addicted to putting people and things in their 'right' place.” By making the hated tax collector the hero of his parable, Jesus tells us to put all such judgment of others based on outside realities aside. It is not what job you have that makes you holy. Nor even what others may think about you.

One way to understand humility is to compare it to its opposite, pride. Now in this context we are not talking about appropriate pride, which Miriam-Webster defines as "respecting yourself and deserving to be respected by other people" or 2. "a feeling of happiness that you get when you or someone you know does something good." No, It is a third definition of Pride we are talking about: “a feeling that you are more important or better than other people”

Writer CS Lewis has two very good statements about this kind of pride: "A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you're looking down, you can't see something that's above you.” and "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man....It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone.”

Humility can be nurtured by freeing ourselves from the game of comparing ourselves to others. A phrase came to me as I thought about this sermon: “God does not grade on a curve.” Remember in school when a teacher would give letter grades according to how you did in comparison to the rest of the class? So you could get an “A” with 60% if the whole class bombed a test. God does not grade on a curve because we are not competing with each other. As the comic Pogo told us years ago, “we have met the enemy and he is us.” We are called as spiritual people to become our truest and best self.

Freeing ourselves from the comparison game also allows us to do God’s

work. Mother Theresa once said, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them." Freeing ourselves from the game of who has the most toys also allows us to cultivate another wonderful virtue, gratitude. Henry Ward Beecher once wrote "Pride slays thanksgiving....A prideful man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves." Humility is a step that helps us to become people of gratitude.

Finally, humility allows us to know ourselves, and to be fully and truly known by others. English contemplative Monica Baldwin tells us, "What makes humility so desirable is the marvelous thing it does to us; it creates in us a capacity for the closest possible intimacy with God." When we are able to tear down the pretenses and the false selves, we can truly be known and loved for who we are. This is the greatest gift of humility.

As spiritual seekers let us cultivate humility, not just here within these 4 walls, but in all our life. Let us be honest with ourselves, put aside judgment of others and release unhelpful pride. Humility is a powerful virtue. It can make us strong and able to accomplish much. Humility gives us the power to live lives of truth, connection, fullness and love with ourselves, one another and with God.

AMEN

#### **Luke 18:9-14**

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."