

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

If we had to name one Christian trait that is most difficult to have, which one would it be? Certainly we might disagree on the answer here. Is it love? Compassion? Patience? All are difficult for us to live every day. But maybe for a different reason, I would like to suggest to you that *humility* is the most difficult trait to have. Humility is a strange thing. As a rule, once you discover you have it you lose it. Humility is like a rare flower -- put it on display and it instantly wilts and loses its fragrance! Where there is true humility, most people don't see it.

I heard once about a man who talked to a French monk. The monk said his monastic order was not as famous as other orders. The Jesuits were famous for their scholarship. Another order was famous for its acts of kindness to the poor. But then he declared, "But when it comes to humility, we're the **best!**" His proud declaration already revealed that his order was not so successful in humility as he thought!

What does God tell us about humility in our text for today? While God encourages us to truly be humble! **1) We are humble when we don't think more of ourselves than we ought. 2) We are humble when we uphold the good reputation of others. 3) We are humble when we willingly accept the admonition of others.**

Let's consider the first point... humility means that we don't think more of ourselves than we ought. "**Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.**"

We heard Jesus speak of a similar situation in our Gospel lesson for today. One evening, Jesus was invited to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee. Jesus noticed that the guests tried to pick places of honor at the table. These people apparently thought themselves worthy of a seat of honor. Jesus used this opportunity to teach the value of humility. He said, "Don't sit in the best place. Perhaps someone more important was invited, and you will be embarrassed to when you have to move to a lower place. Instead, pick the least important place. If you are invited to a better seat, you will receive honor." Now, in teaching such things, Jesus was not showing his disciples how to make a good impression, or how to make one's self look good before others. Jesus was teaching the value of humility... genuine humility.

(1) Humility means first of all **acknowledging to God your position before him**. Before God, we are mortal humans with extremely limited power and influence. Even the ruler of a powerful country is nothing when compared to the One who rules the entire universe. Countless sins arise when people foolishly think that equality with God is something that is possible and within our grasp. In fact, this was the very first sin committed by *Adam and Eve*! Satan promised our first parents, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil." The temptation to be like God was too great for them. They ate of the fruit. Therefore, the first step of humility is recognizing that we are God's **creation**, and He is infinitely greater than us.

(2) Humility also means **acknowledging that we are sinners**. Jesus told a parable of a Pharisee who went to the temple and thanked God that he was not a sinner like other men. A tax collector also entered the temple and prayed, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." The man who approached God with a humble heart was forgiven. So not only is God infinitely greater than us, but he is

perfect, while we are sinners. The person who fails to fully acknowledge his sinfulness will never be humble. We can't help but be humble when we realize and confess that we fall far short of the moral perfection which God demands of us.

(3) Finally, humility is knowing that **we are no better than anyone else**. By nature we like to think we are better than others. In fact, how often don't we try to ruin the reputation of someone else so that we look better? Our text speaks of this when it says, "**What you have seen with your eyes do not bring hastily to court, for what will you do in the end if your neighbor puts you to shame?**" This Proverb speaks of a man who immediately takes his neighbor to court over a dispute. He's eager to ruin his neighbor's reputation in order to prove himself right. It often happens that the neighbor is found to be in the right, and the man is proven wrong. His reputation is ruined because he tried to ruin another's.

The proverb continues: "**If you argue your case with a neighbor, do not betray another man's confidence, or he who hears it may shame you and you will never lose your bad reputation.**" Here, the man reveals the secret of his neighbor in the hopes of ruining his reputation. But again, his plan turns against him. When others hear how the man doesn't keep a secret, his reputation is lost. To regain your good reputation is a very difficult thing.

So let's sum up what's warned about here. When we lack humility, we will do anything to try to look better in the eyes of people. One way to look better in the eyes of others is if you bring down those around you a few pegs. When we ruin the reputation of another so that we will look better, we are sinning against God.

Listen to yourself carefully this week. It happens incredibly often that we talk about other people. Listen carefully to yourself and what you're doing to that other person's reputation. Are you spreading rumors? Are you maybe telling the truth... but it will hurt their reputation? Are you revealing secrets? It comes so naturally to put down others we often don't even realize we're doing it. God calls us to humility and tells us to watch what we say about our neighbor.

Our text shows one more characteristic of the humble person. This part of the parable is the hardest to understand. "**A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.**" What is referred to by this phrase, "**A word aptly spoken**"? Since the context is speaking of humility, about our reputation, and about our relationship with our neighbor, the "**word aptly spoken**" must be the opposite. It must be a word that defends your neighbor's reputation. Or, it could also refer to a word of rebuke said privately (not publicly) to someone who has done wrong to correct them and help them to keep their good name. . In either case, a word is a beautiful thing. The proverb compares a loving defense of our neighbor and his reputation to golden apples on a silver setting... a beautiful decoration for any table. The wise and humble person will accept the word of correction and learn from it. The proud person never wants to hear what he did wrong and will argue when a person lovingly tries to correct him.

Friends, I ask you, then, how humble are you? Have you ever thought more of yourself than you ought? Have you ever thought, "I have done good work! Why has no one noticed?" Or, "Why was this person acknowledged for their help... I've done so much more!" Have you ever attempted to damage the reputation of another person so that you looked better before others? Have you ever gossiped, or spread rumors because it made you feel good and look good? Do often compare yourself to others and feel you are better? Have you ever yelled at a person who in love tried to correct one of your sins or mistakes? We all must confess that we are not as humble as God wants us to be. In fact, even if we became more humble, we'd be proud of that fact, and lose what we gained! What hope do we have? How can we be humble as God demands?

Our only hope is if God himself declares us to be humble and makes us humble. And this is exactly what he did when he sent his Son Jesus to earth. Jesus was perfectly humble. In Paul's letter

to the Philippians we read, **“Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!”** [Phil. 2:6-8]. In Jesus we see the epitome of humility. Jesus from all eternity is almighty God. But Jesus willingly set aside his divine power and authority to become man. He experienced all of the trials and discomforts of living in a sinful world, just like you and I. Jesus was born under the law. The One who **made** law, willingly placed himself under it! And he lived a perfect life. He was completely obedient. He even willingly went to the cross and died there.

Why did Jesus humble himself such? Jesus had it all! Why would he willingly give it up to live a humble life on earth, and die the death of a criminal? The reason is simple: our sin, and His love. By Jesus’ perfect humility and obedience, he lived the kind of life which God demands of all of us. By humbly dying on a cross with criminals, Jesus paid the penalty of all sin. Try to remember all the times you failed to be humble in your life. Think of the lack of humility you have even today. For such sins Jesus died on the cross. Through faith in Him, we are considered perfectly humble by God, our heavenly Father. God has made us humble by his power and love through Jesus Christ!

God has given us a wonderful gift through Jesus... pure and total humility! In thankfulness to him, we now strive to be humble, just as he has already declared us to be. The more we understand God’s love for us in Christ, the easier it is for us to be truly humble. Charles Spurgeon, a famous 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher, said it this way, **“The higher a man is in grace, the lower he will be in his own estimation. Not because he is comparing himself with people, but because he is comparing himself with the Lord God.”** By God’s grace we realize who we are (that is, sinners) AND what he has made us (saints).

Now understand correctly what it means to be humble...

- Being humble does NOT mean that you think of yourself as worthless. On the contrary! God values us so highly that he sent his Son for us!
- Humility does not mean that you must not be confident in your abilities which God has given. On the contrary! God has given us our abilities for the good of His Kingdom. We should be confident about our abilities... but our confidence is in the Giver of these gifts, not in ourselves.
- Being humble does not mean you should hesitate to serve, or be timid to take action. God has asked us to serve him boldly and confidently! Jesus called for boldness when he said, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation!” (Mark 16:15)
- Being humble also does not mean that we never correct our brother who has sinned. Rather we will encourage and correct the erring believer that he may repent and be saved. We don’t do this with a spirit of superiority and pride, but with love, respect and humility. We also will accept such rebukes from others in a similar spirit.

So what is the key to humility? If you focus on yourself to produce humility, only pride will result. True humility comes when you stop looking at yourself, and instead look to Jesus. True humility comes when we daily repent of our sins, and daily turn to Jesus for forgiveness, life and salvation. True humility comes when we live for God and not for ourselves. Thank God he has declared us to be perfectly humble through his Son Jesus! May God strengthen us to be humble each day of our lives. Amen