

Honest Humility

October 27, 2019

Luke 18:9-14

In my first year of seminary, I did something that, growing up, I was told I should never do: I got a tattoo. My best friend Matt told me about where he had gotten many of his done, and he took me to get Psalm 131 tattooed in Hebrew on my right shoulder blade. During that trimester, I had been studying that psalm for my Hebrew capstone course, and had basically fallen in love with it. It reads, “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, and my eyes are not raised to high. I do not occupy myself things too great or too marvelous for me, but I have calmed and quieted my being like a small child weaned from its mother. Like this small child is my soul beside me. Wait, O Israel, for the Lord, now and forevermore.” It’s short, simple, but powerful, reminding all who read it and hear it to be humble in heart, much like the parable Jesus tells in the passage today.

Before we get to the passage though, it is worth touching on where the word “humility” comes from. As a bit of a preview of one of the classes I plan on teaching at some point, I will tell you all that the root word of “humility” is *humilitas*, literally “to bring low.” In essence, to be humble/have humility is to bring one’s self low, to admit to one’s place in the world and to admit dependency upon God. However, there is another word in the English language that derives from this same Latin root *humilitas*: “humiliation.” “Humiliation” is to bring others low, whether physically or emotionally, therein exalting one’s self. So, although we have one root word, we have two words that have very contrasting meanings, and with them, stigmas. We see both of these words embodied in the characters of the story today.

The first character we meet is the Pharisee, a member of the religious elite, a name that literally means “separated one.” We are told the Pharisee stands off by himself. So, already, we have this image of the Pharisee being arrogant/full of himself. In the previous weeks, we read passages where those Jesus heals fall to their knees and pray to God. The Pharisee though is standing, and by himself, as if to physically lift himself up above others there and to single himself out, separate from all the rest. As if that weren’t enough, listen again to his prayer: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” He boasts of all that he does. According to the law, one need only fast on the Day of Atonement, which is the 10th day of the 7th month, meaning that his fasting practice is 104x as frequent as the common person. Also according to the law, a portion of only select items need be given up, but he gives up a portion of everything he has. He also creates a very clear “us and them” mentality simply by saying “I thank you that I am not like other people.” So, he’s made out to be very pompous and self-absorbed, as he humiliates others to exalt himself above the rest.

The tax collector, on the other hand, remains far off from the Pharisee. I imagine this scene as the Pharisee towards the front, right in front of the altar, while the tax collector is towards the back, designating a lack of worthiness to approach any further. On top of that, he is averting his eyes from the heavens, a stance often used to portray “remorse” or “shame.” He is beating his chest, which, though it was a common occurrence for one expressing repentance, it sounds like he is punishing himself, and he prays, “God, be merciful upon me, a sinner.” He asks for mercy, like a defendant on trial before a judge, and names himself for what he is, a

sinner. So, he stands far off from the Pharisee, expressing unworthiness; he hangs his head, as if ashamed of himself; he beats his chest, as if to punish himself; and he asks for mercy as a sinner, readily admitting his place in the world and who he is. Whether by humility, a self-criticalness, or something else, this man is lowering himself down as far as he can while remaining honest and not exaggerating it to any extent.

Comparing these two characters, we can see that the Pharisee embodies “humiliation” while the tax collector embodies “humility.” This distinction is important to make, because Jesus really emphasizes this point with the last line “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus does not say one person is better than the other, that the Pharisee cannot change his ways and humble himself. However, he does still get the point across that the tax collector has the right idea, and that this idea of “humility” over “humiliation” is the right track to be on. Both the reading for today and the psalm I recited earlier emphasize the power and importance of humility. So, what then must we do? What does it mean to be “humble before God”?

Let us look to the tax collector for direction. He stands far off, averts his eyes, bangs on his chest, and prays for mercy, calling himself a “sinner.” The short of it is he is facing the truth. Unlike the Pharisee, who attempts to hide his sinfulness behind grandiose actions and observances, the tax collector comes forward, saying, “I am guilty.” We find no “but” in his prayer, as if to argue that he is still better than someone else. He admits his place not just before God but in relation to his fellow human, acknowledging the constant need of God’s mercy/grace and his equality among all humans. The hanging his head in shame, he is more than just saying words; he is speaking from his heart, and feels the pain of every word. What’s more, he asks for mercy rather than just assume that it will be his. He recognizes the need to ask God for it before it can be granted, as it is something only God can give. So, in short then, to be humble is to be honest; honest about one’s relation to God, honest about one’s relation to other humans, honest about one’s sinfulness, and honest with the words that come from your heart. Have you been honest lately?