

EXTREME SPIRITUAL MAKEOVER:
"FROM PRIDE TO HUMILITY"
Luke 18:9-14

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Our son Brad was a better-than-average high school football player. He played on a team that was always in contention for a state championship. His name or picture was often splashed on the Saturday morning sports page of the Lexington Leader. I've never believed kids learn much from fatherly lectures so, I always tried to communicate values through often repeated, pithy, little statements. Every Friday, before Brad went to his high school football game, I shared the words of Proverbs 16:18 — *Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.* Today, Brad is a physician not a theologian. Nevertheless, he can easily quote Proverbs 16:18 — *Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.*

According to Dante, pride is human sin number one, the worst of all. According to C.S. Lewis, pride is a "cancer that eats up the very possibility of love, or even common sense." It's going to take some major demolition and strong chemotherapy to heal us of pride. So, on our way to Holy Communion, let's bring out the big bulldozers for this extreme spiritual makeover.

PRIDE: Webster calls it vanity, conceit, narcissism, unreasonable delight in one's position or deeds.

Is pride a virtue or vice? Which is it in our country? I'm proud to be an American. I'm proud to be a parent. We got a new grand daughter this week special delivery from Seoul, Korea. I'm especially proud to be a grandparent. Most days I'm proud to be a Methodist. When I rejoice in those events of life am I committing a deadly sin or embracing a worthy virtue? My father lived by the motto "Never tell him he's good, it might go to his head." Did my father save me from pride or damage my self-esteem? We do not encourage pride by expressing warm-hearted admiration. Conditional love does not create humility. It sows the seed of humiliation.

A child that gets a pat on the back for doing a lesson well is receiving worthy praise. Families are smart to be mutual admiration societies. Of all the places in the world we ought to be able to go and get a hug and a word of encouragement and some sense of affirmation to make it through the day, we ought to be able to go home and find those kinds of things. Self-respect is one thing. Self-infatuation is another.

Pride is somehow this deep inner part of ourselves that always has the desire to be better than others. It germinates in the swamps of comparison and

competition.

So, two men went to church one day. Two men went to pray. One says to himself, “*God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get*” (Luke 18:11-12).

What’s happening here? It’s one of those straightforward little parables that really doesn’t need a sermon around it. You can just read it and get it. The Bible says “He prayed to himself saying these words.” I think that’s a revealing little statement. He prayed to himself about who he was. He’s praying, or is he? Is he talking to God who knows all things or to himself who needs to prove all things?

What has this tax collector got to do with this Pharisee’s righteousness? What is he trying to prove? Is he trying to prove something to himself, trying to help himself out a little bit? It’s that stuff that pride is made of, that inner need that we have again and again always to be in comparison with somebody else. “I’m better than,” or “I’m worse than,” or “I wish I could make up to...”. You know what that’s like. It lingers in the human soul.

C.S. Lewis once said, “A proud man is always looking down on things and people, and of course as long as you are looking down, you cannot find God because God is always above you.” The need to compare. Why? Why?

I may not be the best person in the world, but I’m better than the hypocrites up at your church.” — Pride.

Our church preaches the real Gospel, believes the whole Bible, has no creed but Christ. — Pride.

Who are all these other sick people sitting in this waiting room? I’m glad I don’t look as pitiful as they do! — Pride.

We live in Brentwood, we expect more than other cities. So put some brick around your garbage dumpsters, ordinary wood won’t do. — Pride.

It’s difficult, if not impossible, to save money when your neighbors keep buying things you cannot afford. — Pride.

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

We’ve got to find an antidote for pride. It’s going to take some bulldozers to come in and just wipe the thing out so something better can be built in its place. Radical problems call for radical cures. Radical sin calls for extreme measures.

HUMILITY—the antidote for pride, an extreme spiritual makeover.

One of the finest statements of humility in the Bible is from Philippians, Chapter 2. It's in your sermon notes. We call it the Kenosis, the self-emptying of Christ in which he became one among us. *“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus”* is how Paul starts. *“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the 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.”* That's humility.

Humility comes when you know who you are. You are a child of God. Equality with God is not something to be grasped. We are created in the image of God. We are not God. It seems to me that the human race fundamentally is sort of ticked off that we are not God. It's the very stuff that got Adam and Eve kicked out of the Garden of Eden. There's something inside of us that would like to displace God and take God's place.

Remember that old joke about Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers back in the 60's. He came in late one night after another win, crawled in bed with his wife, who suddenly awakened and said “God your feet are cold.” To which Lombardi responded, “It's okay, honey. When we're in bed together you can just call me Vince.”

Bertrand Russell said, “Every man would like to be God if it were possible — some find it difficult to admit the impossibility.

Humility begins when we know ourselves, not as doormats but children, children of God. Humility comes when we know our neighbors. They are sinners. So are we. We are not good people who occasionally make a mistake. We are lost sheep who err and stray from God's ways and follow too much the devices and desires of our own thought. Humility gives us new eyes with which to see the people around us.

The best definition of humility I know is ‘down to earth.’ The word comes from ‘humus,’ down to earth. Down to earth people know they have something in common with all of the people in the world. Down to earth people understand that they are part of the human race. Down to earth people know that on a given day and a given moment I'm not any better than anybody else. Whenever we start thinking that we may be better than someone else, we can be sure that we are being acted upon, not by God, but by the devil.

Humility is being down to earth. It's time to join the human race. *“Judge not,”* said Jesus, *“for in the same way that you judge others, you will be judged.”* Tough words, hard words, humbling words. Helpful words.

Humility knows God. Not knows about God, but knows God. ‘Know’ in the sense

of being wedded to. Know God like a wife knows her husband. In the mystical union of marriage, two spirits become so united over the years that they are one. If you don't believe that observe the grief of a widow or widower at the death of a spouse, or sense the chaos and devastation when a long-time marriage ends in divorce. Two have become one. Know God like that!

When you know God that intimately, you will be delightedly humble, for you will no longer be thinking about yourself at all, only how to please your God. It's not announcing, it's falling in love with the Lord and knowing you're one with human beings and accepted as a beloved child of God. That is humility.

Humility is receiving mercy. The prayer of the tax collector is simple: *"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."* You can remember that, I can remember that. It's a prayer any of us can pray: Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

God forgives sinners. A soldier asked an Abba if God accepted repentance. The old man thought a moment and then replied "Tell me, dear friend, if your coat is torn, do you throw it away?" "No," replied the soldier, "I mend it and use it again." "Ah," said the Abba, "if you are so careful about your coat, will not God be equally careful about his children?"

God's in the mending business. In our throw-away world, God wants to mend you, and make you new. He'll take these old broken souls of ours and make them new again. That's what mercy is about. That's what grace is about.

We receive Communion. We don't take communion, as we might grab a sandwich at McDonalds. We receive the sacrament, with hands wide open, as a child coming to a loving parent flings wide her arms to be picked up and held.

Come open-handed, needy, longing to be loved, not afraid to receive what we all desperately need — grace and forgiveness that leads to true humility and gratitude.

After all, the old prophet Micah was right. *'What does the Lord require of us — but to act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God?'* (Micah 6:8).

Amen.