

Down Ain't So Bad

Luke 14:7-11

An Amish farmer bought new overalls. Of course, determined to avoid pride, he put on his new overalls and looked in the mirror. He said, "Oh, this will never do! Too flashy!" So, he removed the new overalls and put on his old worn and dirty ones. He stood again in front of the mirror and said, "Ah, Amos, you'd look good in anything!" Sins of pride can be so deceitful, that we can be proud even of our humility. In today's text, Jesus addressed a less subtle manifestation of pride.

⁷When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. ¹¹For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

- Luke 14:7-11

This event occurred at a Sabbath Day meal in the home of a prominent Pharisee. Now, how was it that Jesus was in a position to be observing these guests as they jockeyed for position? He had been invited, of course. Pharisees liked to host popular rabbis. It was a status thing. But, there is more at play in this circumstance than simply a pretentious Pharisee entertaining the current "*Rabbi du jour*" in his home.

Verse 1 of this chapter says of Jesus, "... he was being carefully watched." Verse 2 adds, "There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy." Literally, it says, "And behold, there was a certain man before Him ..." More than a few commentators suggest that this man was planted there by the Pharisees just to see what Jesus would do. Dropsy was a build-up of fluid in the body. It probably wasn't going to kill the man so quickly that healing him could not have waited until after the Sabbath.

The Gospels record seven incidents of Jesus healing on the Sabbath and each time, He landed in the Pharisaic dog house. On this day, Jesus took the offensive. He asked, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day or not?" (verse 3). He knew what these Pharisees were up to. After a silent pause, Jesus healed the man, sent him away and added: "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?" (verse 5). Whether from shame, rage or bewilderment, they did not answer. These men would waste no time rescuing a loved one or even a valuable piece of livestock on the Sabbath, but, they would refuse to assist a suffering man.

The Pharisees were scrutinizing Jesus, but He was watching them back. Banquet tables were set up in a U-shaped pattern. The guest of honor was seated at the central-most point. Seats next to his were places of honor, and the relative importance of seats descended the farther a person was seated from the guest of honor. Sitting at the very end of this table arrangement was the last step before eating at the card table with the kids. Jesus had to have been amused as He watched the guests maneuver for the best seats.

Jesus gave them a bit of advice disguised in a parable about picking seats at a wedding feast. "A-list" people figure that no party can start without them so they meander in at their leisure. Those who are early need to be mindful as to where they sit so as to avoid the embarrassment featured in the story. Of course, this would only have to happen once to a man for him to conclude, "Down ain't so bad. After all, I can only move up if I don't set myself up to be humiliated in the first place."

Humility is the theme of this story just as it is a theme that recurs many times throughout the Bible. To call humility a “biblical mantra” is not overstatement. Why the repetition? It is because no man can ever really “get” Jesus except through humble eyes. Jesus reveals the holiness of the Father, and no man can grasp God’s holiness until he grasps his own sinfulness. Or, perhaps, it’s *vice versa*. No man can really grasp his own sinfulness until he grasps God’s holiness. In any event, an understanding of our own sinfulness and an understanding of God’s holiness go hand-in-hand. One vision enhances the other.

I. God’s Word Calls Man to Humility

A. Jesus’ Teachings Did Not Introduce Humility to the People of God

Jesus’ parable should have rung a familiar chord to the Pharisees and the experts in the law. Solomon had painted an almost identical picture, only the setting was a king’s court rather than a wedding feast:

⁶Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence,
and do not claim a place among great men;
⁷it is better for him to say to you, “Come up here,”
than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman. – Proverbs 25:6, 7

It requires a humble servant to get out of the way so that God can be glorified in the things He wishes to accomplish through men. Sometimes, God looked for humble servants in the Old Testament, but if His chosen man was not adequately humble, God could break him. Gideon, a judge over Israel, was hiding in a wine press when God called him to lead His people. Gideon tried to dismiss himself, admitting that he was the least important member of the least important family in the least important clan of the not particularly notable tribe of Manasseh. On the other hand, Solomon, another judge, didn’t have low self-image issues. He pushed the envelope of God’s tolerance of his pride time and again. His greatest conquest against the Philistines came only after God allowed him to be blinded and enslaved.

God’s purpose in allowing His people to endure the captivity in Babylon was to purge them of their affection for idols. Still, He did not wish for the Jews to be capriciously victimized by their captors, so He also kept the kings of Babylon in line. Nebuchadnezzar, the same king who had taken the Jews into exile, built a ninety-foot-tall idol and commanded all his people as well as the captive Jews to bow before it. The penalty for noncompliance was to be cast into a furnace. You remember the story. Three young Jews - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused. The furious king had the furnace stoked so hot that the guards who tossed these three rebels into the fire died. The three young men were not harmed. Nebuchadnezzar recognized that these young men were “servants of the Most High God.” He called them out of the furnace and promoted them. It seemed prudent under the circumstances.

Amazingly, that experience did not take. Seeds of new oppression began to germinate. The king had a weird dream which Daniel interpreted as a warning for him to humbly repent. Daniel said, “Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice; Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue” (Daniel 4:27). But, a year later, Nebuchadnezzar was on his roof looking over the city. He said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Daniel 4:30). The king was still struggling with humility. God had finally had enough:

³¹The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. ³²You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes." – Daniel 4:31, 32

Immediately thereafter, the king went through a "Howard Hughes-esque" eccentricity phase. His hair and fingernails grew to bizarre lengths. He lived in the wild and ate grass just as Daniel prophesied.

³⁴At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. – Daniel 4:34

After these things transpired, we have no further record of God's people being picked on again during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel 5 picks up with God's judgment on a new king during a new era of oppression, but Daniel 4 concludes with these telling words of an authentically humbled king:

... ³⁷Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble. – Daniel 4:37

B. The New Testament Only Reinforces God's Expectation for Man's Humility

Humility is prerequisite to our salvation. "Blessed are the poor in spirit ..." for only the humble can see God's holiness and their personal unholiness with proper clarity. Humility is prerequisite to the best that God has in mind for any community of faith - be it a church, a family or a friendship. Ministry and relationships are most effective when believers genuinely do not look after only their own interests but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4). Jesus is given to us as a pattern in humility. Philippians 2:5 says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus ..." In His nature, Jesus was God, but He became a man, a servant and a sacrifice in order to save us.

But, if humility is not adequately learned through our desire to resemble Jesus, God is still willing to pull out the Old Testament play-book so as to drive us to reality. In the Old Testament, it may seem that God only humbled men to remind them who is God, but the New Testament clearly teaches that God humbles his children because he loves them. As our Father, He may discipline us as a means of teaching us humility. He only asks us to remember that He is acting out of love and fatherly purpose:

... "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
⁶because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." – Hebrews 12:6, 7

Why is humility such a repetitious Biblical theme? It is because any exaltation of ourselves by ourselves is just silly in the grand scope of things. We were sinners estranged from our Creator. Now, in Christ, we're not estranged anymore. God's Word calls us to humility, but so also do the realities of our lives.

II. Human Limitations Drive Man to Humility

A. Our Physical Limitations Should Humble Us

In June of 1991, the fragile character of human life was driven home to me in a unique way. An eighteen-year old co-worker of Linda was found dead in her bedroom after having only spoken to her mother a few moments earlier through the door. Jen was an apparently healthy young woman. There was no foul play, no physical trauma, no evidence of a congenital health problem and no chemicals. The only explanation offered was little more than a guess. A shock from a curling iron may or may not have been enough to stop her heart, but there was no evidence of electrocution *per se*.

The human body is the most sophisticated machine in the universe. In that respect, the body is a tribute to the majesty of its Design Engineer. But, as amazing as the body is, its delicacy is undeniable. Virus' which could not even be seen until recent technologies made their detection possible can lay us out or even kill us. One experience with bad air can affect respiration for the duration of life. One bad piece of seafood can put even the biggest, strongest man on his back.

B. Our Intellectual Limitations Should Humble Us

February 17, 2004: Just as squirrels bury their acorns to protect them from predators for later use, a man from Howard, Wisconsin, put his ammunition and three handguns in a safe place before he and his wife went on vacation. He wanted to be sure they would be there when they returned. But just as squirrels can forget where they buried a particular nut, this man forgot his hiding place. When they returned home, his wife turned on the oven to cook dinner. Shortly afterward, the couple ducked behind the refrigerator as bullets began to explode like popcorn. He then recalled where he had put his guns. No humans were hurt, but the oven was a total loss. No matter how clever we consider ourselves to be, a day will come when we face our mental limitations.

In a way, humility is prerequisite to learning anything, for any openness to learning requires a spoken or unspoken admission that we do not know something. With no hunger for Bible facts, a person can become very arrogant in his ignorance. With no hunger for insight, we might arm ourselves with data but have no sense of how that data should help us to live as the people of light that God wants us to be.

This lack of humility in learning is seen in the Pharisees with whom Jesus was dining. Their religion was a mechanized code. What they taught others was trivial. They missed the point of the Sabbath; that it was God's loving provision for man's need for rest and reflection and not simply a way to set him up to sin by breaking Sabbath rules. They missed the point about fasting. They missed the point about generosity. They missed the point about everything because they abandoned a quest for insight in favor of a checklist of rules by which they could grade themselves on their own external righteousness.

In our colleges, students progress from freshman, to sophomore, to junior, to senior. The Academy of Athens understood the link between humility and learning. First-year members were called "wise men," second-year students, "men who love wisdom" and third-year students, "learners." This perspective is useful for any man with a hunger to learn, but especially for one who worships the Omniscient Creator. What we do not know is staggering compared to what we now know or can ever know.

C. Our Performance Limitations Should Humble Us

Of all the people who will die on the same day you die, what are the odds that your greatest achievement will be remembered? I don't ask that to depress anyone. It's just cold, hard reality. This church has two ministers who think they're competent, a handful of amateur musicians and a number of decent golfers. So, I could not help but smile when I ran across these words in the course of my study of this parable. The author poses this question: "How can we retain our humility?"

"We can retain it by comparison with the perfect. It is when we see or hear the expert that we realize how poor our own performance is. Many a man has decided to burn his clubs after a day at golf's Open Championship. Many a man has decided never to appear in public again after hearing a master musician perform. Many a preacher has been humbled almost to despair when he has heard a real saint of God speak. And if we set our lives beside the life of the Lord of all good life, if we see our unworthiness in comparison with the radiance of his stainless purity, pride will die and self-satisfaction will be shriveled up." - William Barclay

Natural man resists humility at every turn. Pride and the tendency to justify oneself are woven into our fabric. Even in the life of a man who seems to be humble or truly strives to be humble, hidden pride will persist as a subtle presence in need of purging. We can be driven by pride and not even aware of it.

Ever notice how the first thing you do after getting a new haircut is go fishing? Not with a rod and reel, but with words? You might be able to get what you're after with just a single cast. You look your spouse in the eye and ask, "Well?" Less baitable mates might have to be lured along a bit further: "Oh, I don't know if this looks very good. What do you think?" Woe to the spouse who doesn't know how to respond. All of us know that the questioner isn't the least bit interested in hearing the truth or even our opinion. All he or she really wants to hear is affirmation that they look good.

There is something fundamentally wrong in every sinner. It is pride - sometimes buried, sometimes overt - but always a hindrance to emptying ourselves before God. God desires our unbridled fellowship. Our sin keeps us from God. Our pride keeps us from seeing our sin. God's yearning for our restoration to Himself is why the call to humility is a thread that runs throughout His Word:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. - 1 Peter 5:6

© 2005 by R. Karl Crouch, 2183 Veumont Drive, Lancaster, PA 17601