

11.5.23

Descend Into Greatness Matthew 23:1-12**Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

In our series *Getting Ready for the King*, so far we've talked about having our priorities straight and giving to God what belongs to God. Last week we discussed the Great Commandment and the importance of loving God and our neighbors. Putting God first, and loving God and people are part of being ready for the King. A third way we need to prepare ourselves is by **being humble and living as Jesus teaches and models for us to live**. Listen to **Matthew 23:1-12**,

“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3 therefore, **do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach**. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds **to be seen by others**; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, **and you are all students**. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 **The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.**”

What comes to mind when you hear the word, humble? Is it a word you think of positively or negatively? **To be humble is to be “Marked by modesty in behavior, attitude, or spirit; not arrogant or prideful.”** Is humility something you admire and appreciate in people or is humility something you think people are foolish to pursue? If you were to list the names of people you admire, look up to, or support, are they individuals who are humble or people who are boastful and prideful? Not only the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, but the whole Bible is filled with teaching about the importance of humility. **1 Peter 5.5b-6** exhorts us. **“And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for “God opposes the**

proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.” That is a clear statement about what God does: **“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”** Peter is quoting Proverbs 3.34.

Humility is a virtue that God’s people are to practice. Numbers 12:3 (NIV) tells us, **“Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.”** In **2 Chronicles 7:14** God says, **“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”** **Psalm 25:9 (NIV)**, **“He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.”** **Proverbs 22:4**, **“The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life.”** The Book of Proverbs is filled with verses urging us to be humble and warning us not to be proud or arrogant.

The New Testament also encourages us to pursue humility so God may exalt us in due time. **Colossians 3:12**, **“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves** (the same image is used by Peter and Paul) **with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”** **Ephesians 4:2**, **“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”** **Philippians 2:3-4**, **“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”**

I know that’s a lot of verses, but I want us to grasp **how important humility is in God’s Word and to living a God honoring life.** Pride, the opposite of humility, is a universal human problem. Pride is at the root of the seven deadly sins. Everyone suffers from it to some degree. We all want to be affirmed, recognized, and appreciated – yet healthy and appropriate relational and emotional needs can quickly slide into selfishness, narcissism, and pride. It’s why Jesus criticizes the scribes and Pharisees so harshly in Matthew 23. Again, and again in the Scriptures, the Lord says, *humble yourselves, and I will exalt you.* John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, was an important Early Church Father (d. 407 A.D) known for his preaching and his

denunciation of the abuse of authority by both church and political leaders. He declared that just as pride is the root of all sin, ***“humility is the root, mother, nurse, foundation, and bond of all virtue.”***

Humility is out of fashion in today’s world and many people seem uninterested in cultivating or practicing it. Is it easier to think of someone well-known or in the public eye who embodies or demonstrates humility or someone who embodies pride and arrogance? The 18th century American preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) stated, ***“We must view humility as one of the most essential things that characterizes true Christianity.”*** Our perspective on humility can be radically changed if we ponder the example of Jesus Christ. **Christ is the ultimate example of humility.** In Philippians 2:5-8 we’re told, ***“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.”*** By the very act of leaving heaven, coming to earth, taking human form, and dying on a cross. Christ demonstrated incomprehensible humility.

Throughout his life on earth, Jesus demonstrated a spirit of profound humility, saying that he came ***“not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”*** (Matt. 20:28). On his last night with the disciples, he took a towel and basin and washed their dirty feet (John 13:1–11), instructing them to follow his example of humble servanthood with one another (John 13:12–17). Andrew Murray describes it well, ***“Christ is the humility of God embodied in human nature; the Eternal Love humbling itself, clothing itself in the garb of meekness and gentleness, to win and serve and save us.”***

While humility doesn’t seem to be a virtue that’s highly valued today, the words ***“humble”*** and ***“humility”*** appear dozens of times in the Bible **because it’s one of the most important personal virtues when it comes to our relationship with God.** Augustine who was an important theologian in the 4th and early 5th centuries said, ***“Should you ask me what is the first thing in religion, I should reply that the first, second,***

and third thing therein is humility.” “True humility is not an abject, groveling, self-despising spirit; it is a right estimate of ourselves as God sees us” (Tryon Edwards).

The prophet Isaiah (57:15, 66:1-2), describes the greatness of God who is beyond our comprehension yet who promises to be with us when we're humble, contrite, and take God's word seriously. The Lord says through Isaiah, ***“This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.”*** If we want to be great at humility then we're wise to read, learn, and follow God's word. Like we need food, and plants need water, our spirit needs regular attention. **James 1:21** tells us to *“welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls”* and reminds us that God ***“gives grace to the humble”*** (James 4:6).

Even when you seek to learn God's word and to be led and taught by the Spirit, life can humble you in other ways. Your health can change, your finances can take a turn, relationships can dissolve, the future is never guaranteed and frequently you must adjust to the unexpected and the unwanted. As painful as all these situations can be, they're also opportunities to learn humility and greater reliance on God.

Where do you find yourself today when it comes to humility? One of my favorite explanations of humility is that **humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.** It's to have a modest view of oneself while focusing on God and others. Augustine gave the following advice to people who wanted to get ahead spiritually, ***“Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility.”*** I think most of us find genuine humility appealing in other people. The Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) wrote the following about a humble person (from *The Adornment of Spiritual Marriage*): *“he is humble in his devotions, both outwardly and inwardly, before God and before all men, so that none are offended because of him. And so he overcomes and casts out Pride, which is the source and origin of all other sins. By humility the snares of the devil, and of sin, and of the world, are broken, and man is set in order, and established in the very condition of virtue. And heaven is opened to him, and God stoops to hear his prayers, and he is fulfilled with grace. And*

Christ, that strong rock, is his foundation. Whosoever therefore grounds his virtues in humility, he shall never err.

The passage from Matthew 23:1-12 is one of Jesus' many teachings about humility and he concludes by saying, ***“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*** This may not always seem to be the case in the world in which we live, but it's true in the eyes and judgment of God. The 16th century reformer of the church Martin Luther said, ***“God created the world out of nothing, and so long as we are nothing, He can make something out of us.”***

Humility is a virtue that is praised not just in Christianity and Judaism, but in virtually every spiritual tradition. Lau Tzu (604-531 BC). wrote 2,500 years ago: *“I have three precious things which I hold fast and prize. The first is gentleness; the second frugality; the third is humility, which keeps me from putting myself before others.”*

In his book, *The Ideal Team Player*, Patrick Lencioni, says the ideal team player is **Humble, Hungry, and Smart**. Don't expect to be carried. Offer to carry. Don't expect to be served. Offer to serve. Give more than you take. Trunk or Treat, the Silent Auction, and Holiday Fair were great examples of this at BBC. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who dedicated and gave his life working for justice said, ***“Life's most persistent and urgent question is: “What are you doing for others?”***

Humility is not being a 'doormat' and allowing people to walk all over you. Instead, it's an understanding that every human being is equally valuable: a recognition that you're worth no more or less than anyone else. For many of us, humility is one of the hardest traits to develop, because it starts from a recognition that we're not always right, and that we don't have all the answers. If you wish to grow in humility, you might try one or more of these activities in the coming week:

Spend time listening to others

A key quality of humility is to value others and enable them to be heard. Spending time listening to others, especially those who may think or believe differently than we do, and drawing out their feelings and values, enabling them to express themselves, is a

powerful way to start. It's important to remember that you're not trying to solve their problems or answer them: just listen and respond to them as a fellow-human.

Be Accepting of Yourself

An important element of humility is accepting yourself with all your faults, rather than judging yourself for your shortcomings. That doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to improve because we're called to do so as followers of Christ; but do this without berating yourself for your negative qualities.

Be grateful for what you have

Take the time to 'count your blessings,' and be thankful for them. It's easy to get sucked into a negative spiral of wanting more, whether of yourself, or materially. Taking time to stop, and remember what you have to be grateful for, is a good way to cultivate a humbler and more positive, frame of mind.

Ask for help when you need it

There is, as many of us will recognize, a form of pride that lies in being able to solve our own problems. Humility, therefore, lies in recognizing when we need help, and being able to ask for it appropriately.

Seek feedback from others on a regular basis

This is particularly important for leaders, but we can all gain from hearing what others think of us. Take time to ask others to provide feedback and make it clear that you welcome their opinions. Listen to the feedback openly and then be grateful.

Review your actions against the language of pride

Pride, arrogance, snobbery, and vanity are unpleasant words. Sometimes it can be hard to avoid feeling a bit proud of ourselves or vain. To cultivate humility, review your feelings against those words: ask yourself '*was that prideful?*', '*was I being a bit vain then?*', and be honest about the answers. Recognizing and naming these feelings for what they are is a good step towards humility.

Finally, as we seek to live as humble followers of Jesus, remember the words of Saint Benedict, ***“The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.”*** and Mother Teresa, ***“If you are humble nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are. Only humility will lead us to unity, and unity will lead to peace.”***

It also helps to remember Jesus’ statement in Matthew 23:12 which is both a warning and a promise, ***“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”***

Prayer: High and lofty God who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy help us to have the mind of Christ and to humble ourselves. Inspire us to make a firm decision to ponder, understand, and adopt Jesus’ way of thinking; make his values and attitudes our own. May Christ’s strong emphasis on humility and meekness and his example of it take hold of our thinking, our desires, and our conduct. May we admire his humility and desire it for ourselves. We earnestly pray for the Holy Spirit to change our hearts, for it’s impossible to do this in our own strength. Give us a right and realistic view of ourselves before You and others so that we don’t think too highly (or too lowly) of ourselves. Help us to turn from the path of pride and vanity and instead respond gratefully to Jesus’ invitation (Matthew 11:29) to ***“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*** Amen

Blessing: Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. **Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.** Ephesians 4:2, Philippians 2:3

Questions for Discussion or Reflection:

1. Why do you think so many passages in the Bible speak about God being with the humble in spirit rather than with the proud?

2. What is it about being humble or having humility that is advantageous spiritually when it comes to your relationship with God?
3. Discuss or reflect on Andrew Murray's statement, "*Christ is the humility of God embodied in human nature; the Eternal Love humbling itself, clothing itself in the garb of meekness and gentleness, to win and serve and save us.*" What are the implications of this for us?
4. Do you think that humility is a virtue that is valued today or not? Why do you believe that? What are the consequences for individuals and societies if humility is not valued?
5. Are there ways you are actively seeking to grow in humility? What are some strategies, practices, or attitudes that have helped you?
6. What is at least one way you can practice "clothing yourself in humility" in the coming week?