

**9/20/26****A Jesus Centered Life*****Luke 18:15-17*****Gwyneth Preu, Brewster Baptist Church**

Good morning, it is great to be here with all of you in person, and those of you worshipping online. My name is Gwyneth Preu, and I work at Brewster Baptist Church as the Director of Family Ministry. I also get to work with the Connecting Team, and the new member process, and with the Women's Ministry. I have three elementary-school-aged children, so our family's life shifted a few weeks ago, when they went back to school – making it feel like the real start of a new season. Is anyone else feeling a little relieved that it is fall? Less traffic, cooler weather, and getting back into routines.

The week before school started, Jon and I took our family to Acadia National Park. It was the first time for our kids, and we went to many of the big spots – Thunder Hole, Jordan Pond House, Sand Beach, and Cadillac Mountain. How many people here have been to Acadia? Acadia is on the coast of Maine, and is strikingly beautiful, with the ocean, mountains, rock formations, and dense trees – and it is, typically, one of the top 10 most visited national parks, every year. When you see some of the views, like this sunset we saw from Cadillac Mountain the night we went, it is **humbling** to see God's amazing creation, and to feel like we are a small part of it. Many of us like to get outside in nature because it gives us a sense of something bigger than ourselves, and reminds us of God's beauty.

One of the things we did in Acadia was climb the North Bubble Rock, right next to South Bubble Rock, mountains that look like – big surprise – bubbles, by their shape. Climbing North Bubble Rock is one of those high reward hikes – you get great views after a short climb. However, to get to those great views so quickly, you have to climb up many stone steps and rocks, at a steep incline. When we did this hike, my kids basically ran the whole way up, while I walked slowly behind them, occasionally asking them to slow down or stay away from the edge. Here is one of the views you can get to after only 20 minutes of hiking – again, up very steep stone steps. When we went down, the kids could fly along, jumping from rock to rock, while I tried to carefully place my feet so I wouldn't twist my ankle. To have my kids be actual leaps and bounds better than me at this hike was pretty **humbling**!

Realizing our own limitations can **humble** us, in a different way than when we are **humbled** by the beauty of God's creation. Sometimes, being **humbled** is harder than just having your kids hike faster than you; we may be **humbled** when something doesn't work out like we hoped, or a medical issue changes our lives. In the passage Suzanne, Jerry, and David showed us today, from *Luke 18*, we see a Pharisee and a Tax Collector, both praying in the temple. This parable, told by Jesus, ends with the verse from *Luke 18:14* about being humble: "*For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*" We are going to look, today, at the **humble** life Jesus is teaching about in this passage – and what it looks like and what it does not.

In the parable, we hear the Pharisee list all the ways he is acting correctly – he fasts twice a week, and tithes ten percent. He is not a thief, or an adulterer, and even claims he does not do anything evil. He actually sounds like a pretty model church member! We'd probably not mind someone like him sitting next to us in a pew. He lists attributes we may aspire to, and someone we might want to join BBC! So why is *he* presented as the bad guy in this parable?

The other character we see is the tax collector, who only says, "*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*" It may be hard for us to understand the depth of dislike people had for tax collectors at the time Jesus was telling this parable. For us, we certainly don't like to be audited by the IRS, but the perception of a tax collector was someone who stole money from needy people, and for their own gain. They worked for the Roman empire, and were seen as traitors by the Jewish people. When telling this story, Jesus intentionally chose a Pharisee, who was seen as a faith leader, and a tax collector, who was universally despised. Jesus is surprising his listeners with this parable, and turning expectations upside down about who is **humble** and who is not, in his kingdom.

The easy summary of this parable is: don't be like the Pharisee who brags about himself. Don't be self-centered, especially to God. Be like the tax collector, who begs God for mercy. But let's push a little deeper – what does being **humble** *really* look like? Is it putting yourself after everyone else in every circumstance, always thinking of others first? Does it mean letting other people take advantage of you or putting yourself down?

Let's look at the passage directly following this parable, in Luke, and see if it can help us understand more about being **humble**.

*Luke 18:15-17* reads: "People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.'" This is the Word of God for us, today.

As someone who works in Family Ministry, I love this passage because it shows Jesus welcoming and caring for children. This is great insight into Jesus, that he desires the children to have a relationship with him. What Jesus says, in verse 17, is especially interesting, "Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." This teaching can give us insight into the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. If Jesus wants us to *receive* the kingdom of God like a little child, what does that show *us* about being **humble**?

If you have spent any time with children, especially younger kids, you know that they are pretty self-centered. If they have a need or a feeling, they will tell you – I'm hungry; I need to go to the bathroom; I don't want to do that; give me that, not this. When we had Vacation Bible School here last month, we had about 80 kids here most days, and the volunteers spent their time caring for the kids' needs – especially the younger ones, who needed extra care and attention. One thing that is fun about kids is they are so transparent about their emotions, so when the kids at VBS were having fun, you could tell! If one of them was upset that a craft did not go how they wanted, or they didn't like the snack, you could tell. So, if Jesus is showing us children as an example, he is not telling us to hide our needs and emotions from him or other people. If anything, he is reminding us to bring our needs to him! Kids love to tell their parents – or sometimes, anyone who will listen – what they are thinking about, and Jesus wants that kind of relationship with us.

Children are also *not* passive. You think about a baby, how they will cry until their needs are met. Before they can even speak, their desire is to be loved and cared for. A baby is expressing their need for a connection with their parents. And this is appropriate! It would be concerning if an infant did not cry when they were hungry or

uncomfortable because *that* is their only means of communication. I think it is great to hear a child crying in church because it reminds us of our need for God!

So, when Jesus tells us to receive the kingdom like a little child, he is not saying to ignore all your own needs. When we look at the example of young children and the idea of being humble, we learn that:

**Being humble is not:**

**1. Setting all our needs aside.**

**2. Passivity.**

These are important points for us to understand – that Jesus is not asking you to let yourself be taken advantage of. He wants you to ask him for what you need, and be in a relationship with him. Being **humble** does not mean letting people bulldoze over you. We may have a perception of a **humble** person as someone who never asks for anything, and only quietly serves in the background. But when Jesus is asking us to have a child-like faith, we know he is not asking us to be passive, but to seek him.

In these back-to-back passages in Luke, Jesus puts the children in sharp contrast to the Pharisee. We learn what being humble *is not*, through the poor example of the Pharisee, and we learn more about what being humble *is*, through the example of children.

So, what are ways we can work towards being **humble** in our lives? Again, there is so much we can learn about approaching Jesus from the way children interact with their parents. Because, while generally, young children are self-centered, they are also obsessed with their parents. For young kids, their parents are their world. They depend on them for food, nurture, stability, and love. It can be even overwhelming, as a parent of young children, how much kids depend on you and need you. Being a new parent and the sense of responsibility and connection with a child is remarkable. In a healthy parent-child relationship, a child desires to be with the parent, trusts them to make decisions, and goes to them when they are upset or hurt.

Unfortunately, there are children and adults who did not receive nurturing love from their parents – which can be so painful, since we are designed to depend on our parents, as young children, and usually still want their approval, as adults. For those who have a difficult or complicated relationship with their parents, thinking of God as a parent can feel hard. However, unlike human parents, we know we can trust God to

provide stability and a loving relationship, which is reassuring when we know that no earthly parent will ever be perfect.

Many of us are familiar with the *Chronicles of Narnia* books, written by C.S. Lewis in the 1950s. They tell the story of various characters who interact with the land of Narnia, a magical place. There are so many good stories that are a part of the seven book series, but one of the most intriguing characters is Lucy Pevensie. She is the youngest, and the first of her siblings to discover Narnia, when she stumbles on it, through a wardrobe. Right from the beginning, Lucy is confident of what she sees and knows about Narnia – especially the power of the lion, Aslan, who cares for, protects, and sacrifices for everyone. In the story, Lucy attaches herself to Aslan in a way that is not showy or bragging, but with trust and commitment. In the Narnia series, Aslan is a clear metaphor for Jesus – offering himself as a sacrifice to save a sinner. Aslan is portrayed as loving, majestic, and relational. Even when her brothers and sister make mistakes or don't trust Aslan, Lucy states her beliefs – without shaming the others or claiming that she was right all along. She is not cynical, and has a child-like (not childish) faith that enables her to see Aslan when the others cannot. Lucy's relationship with Aslan is the perfect example of the faith Jesus wants us to have in him – trusting, open, a real relationship. Aslan always calls Lucy “dear heart” or “dearest”, which shows how C.S. Lewis saw God's care for us. This picture, from the 2005 movie, illustrates the deep trust and relationship between Lucy and Aslan that is a model for our relationship with Jesus.

So, when we think about the example of children, in contrast to the Pharisee, we see that **Being Humble is living a Jesus Centered Life**. Like children are centered on their parents, we want to be centered on Jesus in our daily life. When we think about being **humble**, we don't have to focus on not being self-centered and pushing our needs aside, we want to focus on being *Jesus centered*, and putting Jesus first. Making that shift away from the focus on ourselves puts us on the right path to focus on God.

### **What does living a Jesus Centered Life mean?**

1. **Thanking God for his creation and our life.** Gratitude keeps us **humble**.

Being child-like gives us a sense of wonder about the world. If you want to focus on Jesus, it is always helpful to be in a place of awe, like I felt in Acadia, where you see beauty all around. Those of us who live on Cape Cod are blessed to live in a place

where we are surrounded by natural beauty and have easy access to God's beautiful creation. You can use the Psalms of the Bible, like the one we read for the call to worship, to praise God for his creation. Like children, who are so excited to see a bug or a flower and point it out to others, thank God when you see something that strikes you as interesting or beautiful in his world.

2. **Desiring to spend time with Jesus.** We want to spend time with Jesus, just like children do with their parents. Praying to Jesus – a real conversation, not a monologue or listing all things right or wrong in your life. Looking at how the Pharisee prayed, he told God how wonderful he – the Pharisee – was, instead of seeking God for guidance and building a relationship. Instead, follow the example of Lucy from Narnia, and lean into a relationship with Jesus that involves connection and trust. The tax collector in the parable was also trusting God to have mercy on him, as he bowed before him.
3. **Living an actively humble life.** If we are in a relationship with Jesus, we will want to be talking to him, and reading our Bible, along with serving him and others. This action is a natural outflow of our relationship with Jesus.

C.S. Lewis said, “**True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.**” This quote helps us understand God's desire for us to be actively humble. Being humble is not a passive quality, but one where we live an actively Jesus centered life. There will be times in life when you are **humbled** by circumstances outside your control, when an illness surprises you, or life circumstances change, like a job loss. When this happens, you can apply the same steps of gratitude, time with Jesus, and active humility, to help you through a disappointment or change. Jesus turned expectations upside down when using the Pharisee as an example of what *not* to do, and the tax collector and children as an example of how *to be* humble for his kingdom.

This morning, we heard our scripture read in a unique way, hopefully making it memorable, as we pictured the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the different ways they prayed to God. I am going to end this sermon slightly differently, too. We are going to read three verses from Psalms together, as a way to thank God for his creation and our life, to be **humbled** together. Then I will pray one sentence, before leaving about a minute of silence for us each to spend time with Jesus. As we saw in the parable, don't

use this time to list things for Jesus, or give him a “need to know” list, but just sit, breathe, and talk with Jesus, or listen to him speak to you. I will close us, and then we will continue to praise God, and go out to live an actively **humble** life, through relationship, service, and seeking God.

Now, please read *Psalm 145:1-3* with me: **“I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.”**

God, *be* with us as we come to humble ourselves before you.

Lord, help us to actively seek a humble life by being centered on Jesus, through gratitude, prayer, and action. Amen

Benediction: May you be blessed as you go out today, to live a Jesus centered life, through gratitude, relationship, and service to God. Amen

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. In *Luke 18:9-14*, we read the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. What is your initial reaction to this parable and the way the men pray to God? What similarities do you see in how you pray and talk to God?
2. Why did Jesus use the examples of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in this parable? Who might a modern-day parable include that would surprise us?
3. Jesus says, in *Luke 18:17*, “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” What does receiving the kingdom of God like a child look like? What is the difference between child-like and childish faith?
4. The contrast of the Pharisee’s faith and the faith of a child shows different ways of relating to God. What can we learn from the way children relate to their parents about how we should have a relationship with Jesus?
5. Jesus says, in *Luke 18:14*, “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” What does an actively humble life look like for a Christian, and what are some ways to live it out?
6. Who is someone in your life that lives an actively humble life, and what can you learn from them? Consider letting them know how much you appreciate their faith and service.