

Greatness With Humility

It seems that deep within the soul of most every person, every man and every woman, there lies a natural desire to be more than they are, to be significant, to be that one who will decide the outcome of not only their own circumstances and pursuits in life, but also to be able to influence and even control the actions and behaviors of other people.

And here in our passage in Luke chapter 9 that we'll study today, Jesus reveals to us that some of those same basic human desires were present within His most intimate of disciples.

It seems that the disciples were still under the mistaken belief and hope that Jesus would soon be setting up His majestic kingdom here on the earth. And they envisioned themselves as being in high positions of authority and leadership within His earthly government. And they disputed about which of them would be in the highest positions of authority.

Let's listen to Jesus' instructions about this matter, here beginning in verse 46 of Luke chapter 9. Listen!

⁴⁶Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. ⁴⁷And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, ⁴⁸and said to them, "Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great." (Luke 9:46-48)

Let me say again that it seems to be a common desire within the soul of most every person to be more than they are, to be significant, to be that one who will decide the outcome of not only their own circumstances and pursuits in life, but to also be able to influence and even control the actions and the behaviors of other people.

And while yes, for the quieter, meeker souls among us, that desire and that drive for significance is not as obvious, but nonetheless, even for them, that desire still seems always to be there.

And folks, although those desires and ambitions be fraught with many possibilities of wrong behavior and sin, especially the sin of pride, the attribute of “leadership” is not in itself a bad or wrong thing.

In the Book of Romans chapter 12, “leadership” is named as one of the special “Spiritual Gifts” that the Holy Spirit gives to some of us. And yes, though they were arguing about it in this passage, “leadership” would be required of each one of them as they would, later on, bring the “Church” into existence.

So then again, these compelling desires to lead are not always a bad or wrong thing. Leadership is a good and very necessary element of daily life in most every venue of our existence, within our families, within our workplaces and within our local communities.

But again, while these desires for leadership are often good and very necessary, as we can see taking place here with these disciples, when that desire is misapplied and misused, it can bring about difficulty and strife.

And you and I can clearly see those difficulties and strife taking place today all throughout the fabric of our modern American culture. One of the most prominent and demanding stirrings and upheavals currently taking place within our American culture can be seen in what this culture calls “Woke”, and in a newly developed set of terms called “DEI”, “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion”.

The implied meaning of “Woke” being that those within our citizenry, primarily belonging to ethnic groups other than white Americans, who have here-to-fore been considered lesser in position and importance, have now “awoken” to the desire to be more and greater than they once perceived themselves to be. And they are making their demands with big and bold and often violent behaviors.

And while the “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” movement includes those same ethnic groups, it also includes the LBGTQ segment of our culture. And all of them are demanding their recognition and approval at all costs even to the exclusion of all the rest of the people within our society.

All of these activities are described so clearly for us in the latter verses of Romans chapter 1, where the steps towards reprobation are described for us.

And those words there in Romans 1 then culminate with a description and the behavior of even another segment of our citizenry, people who are not directly involved, but stand to the side and give hearty approval to those who are, that being our politicians, many Hollywood celebrities, the News Media and others like them.

May I say again that “leadership” itself is a good and noble attribute. But when it is wrongly used, it can be very destructive. And the sin of “pride” is most often at the heart of those destructive behaviors and activities.

Here in this passage that we’ll study today, Jesus presents us with some of those same basic desires of men’s hearts being experienced by His disciples. And although these responses are for a different purpose and are clearly within a different setting than these ones in our modern culture that I’ve been giving to us, the wrong and destructive side of “pride” is still at the foundational core of it all.

Again, in these words of scripture, it’s clear that the disciples were still under the mistaken belief and hope that Jesus would soon be setting up His majestic kingdom here on the earth. And they envisioned themselves as being in high positions of authority and leadership within His earthly government. And their dispute was about which of them would be in the highest positions of authority.

Let’s listen to those words again, beginning in verse 46 of Luke chapter 9.

⁴⁶Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. ⁴⁷And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, ⁴⁸and said to them, “Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great.” (Luke 9:46-48)

As we consider these precious words, we need to remind ourselves that Jesus always knows the thoughts that are in each person’s mind. And that was so with His beloved disciples. He knew what each of them was thinking as they discussed who would be greatest among them. And He knew the motivations within each of their hearts.

And you and I need to always remember that the same thing is taking place with each one of us at every moment of every day. No matter what the words

are that come out from our mouths, Jesus knows the real truth of our motives and our thoughts.

Again, "leadership" is so very important. And when God endows us with that "Gift", whether it be a "Spiritual Gift" for use in the ministry, or it be more on the level of a talent to be used in our workplace, we really should be prepared to use it. We just always need to be very careful in "how" we use it. That's because there exists within the very nature of "leadership" a double-edged sword. And that sword can quickly swing either direction depending upon the "lack of" or the "strength of" the Godly character within the person holding that sword.

If that person has a good and pure heart before the Lord, and wants only to achieve that position so that they can benefit others, then all goes well. But when that sword is in the hands of a person who does not have a good and pure heart, its works will prove destructive.

And from these words of scripture, we know that the most desirable form of leadership is the kind that is benevolent and humble leadership, that always pursues the benefit of others and never grasps for the advantage for self.

But as Jesus knew well and as He perceived within the hearts of His beloved disciples, the desire for greatness is compelling and demanding, and can often go astray, even within the hearts of the most righteous of men.

Here in this group of followers were men, called of God into the highest order of service, men who were walking daily with the Lord Jesus, being disciplined by Him and learning the deepest and most intimate truths of God.

But as Jesus taught these men, He knew very well all the possibilities that resided within their hearts. He knew that unless His teachings were received into hearts that were humble and contrite, the real meaning and purpose of God's truths would be ineffectual and lost.

And as He perceived their arguing about which of them would be the greatest, Jesus knew that the hearts of these dear devoted followers were still not ready, still not prepared for the very demanding life that lay ahead of them as they would begin to build and to lead the new church.

And by placing these words before you and me, Jesus is asking us to be willing to examine our own hearts, to question ourselves if we are ready, if we are prepared to receive the deeper more intimate truths of God.

And with these words, Jesus is saying to us, “be very careful of the temptation to think more of yourselves than you are.” He is saying to you and me, “humility”, not “pride” is the pathway to truth. And without genuine humility, truth will lose its power.

That is why Jesus put “humility” at the forefront of all of the many things that He wants each of us to “learn of Him”.

Listen to the call of Jesus given in chapter 11 of Matthew. And please know that these words are not just gentle words of assurance, they are also words of eternal and demanding consequence. He calls to us saying,

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. (Matthew 11:28-29)

Note in these words, that Jesus is giving us the first order of discipleship that we must each embrace. It is not to learn and to know deep theology and doctrine. And it is not to learn methods of service and church building. The first order of discipleship is accepting a life and a lifestyle that is based on and filled with “humility”.

As I've said to you on other occasions, these words “meek and lowly in heart” express two special forms of deep humility, one, the humility that brings ourselves low and esteems all others better than ourselves, the other expresses a humility that extends on further, even to the point of being willing to suffer humiliation so that others might gain. Those words again,

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These words express perfect humility, the kind of humility that the disciples would need if they were going to be trusted to carry forward the gospel of salvation that Jesus had begun.

There in those beginning days of learning and ministry, the disciples were, no doubt, enthusiastic, filled with all sorts of emotions and zeal. Daily they were watching as Jesus did powerful supernatural things, healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding thousands with only a few loaves of bread and two fishes.

And even they themselves had been given special abilities and gifts to heal the sick and to cast out demons.

The reality that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah was beginning to settle into their minds, and along with that reality came the imagination of what their personal roles might be as that kingdom began to take shape.

And from the discussion they were having in this passage, their imagination was running strong with the possibility of their own "greatness" within that kingdom.

And that kind of imagination is a very real and present danger for any person that is given knowledge, authority and leadership. Without realizing what is taking place, corruption can creep in.

A question . . . What would be the provocation, the sly little foxes that could find their way into an otherwise perfect setting of discipleship and could cause someone to switch their focus from the greatness of God to the possibility of their own greatness?

That question has at least a two-fold answer, the first being, such desires are a fundamental part of the sinful nature of man. Each man and woman is born into this world subject to temptation, and especially to the temptation of "pride".

And resident within each and every soul, no matter how young or how old is the desire to be better than and to have more than the next person.

But also, intermingled within our own corrupt desires is the ever-present work of our enemy, the devil. While he is not specifically mentioned in these words, his involvement must be accepted as a given condition.

Some might ask, "But why should we attribute this temptation to satan? Is not our own sin nature powerful enough to carry out the same temptation?" The answer is "Yes" it is.

But we must never discount the presence and the activity of satan. As we look at this particular temptation, we can easily see the circumstantial evidence, the “fingerprints” of satan all over these words being spoken by the disciples.

What is the sin that these dear men were getting caught up in? It’s exactly the same sin that satan himself was caught up in when he was cast out of heaven, the sin of pride and the desire to be “the greatest”.

And is this not also the very same sin that satan used in his temptation of Eve. There in Genesis 3, satan said to Eve, “God knows that in the moment you eat of this fruit, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”

Equality with and eventual superiority over the kingdom of God is the ultimate quest of satan. He would be above every other creature. And to add validation to his claims and efforts, he continually tries to drag as many as he can entice along with him, both angels and people, people like the disciples and people like you and me.

And he is so subtly, but powerfully successful with his efforts. Here and on other occasions, he easily reached into the minds of Jesus’ most devout disciples and enticed them into his plan.

Again, ambition and pride are a natural part of the sinful nature within men and women. It comes resident within us at birth, and it grows exponentially as we grow. And when “pride” and “ambition” get into the hands of those in leadership, they become destructive.

Folks, I do fear for those who cry out for “greatness”. I recall when Cassius Clay, Mohammed Ali, declared over and over again that He was the “greatest”. And at least on one occasion, he declared that he was even greater than Jesus Christ. But then suddenly, at age 42, he was struck down with Parkinson’s disease and rendered helpless, a mumbling, fumbling shell of a man, barely able to walk for all the remaining days of his life.

And I do also fear for this “woke” generation of people and these “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” LGBTQ people who are right now crying out violently and demanding that they be elevated to their own idea of “greatness”. What will become of them, and of us?

Again, yes, the desire to “lead” is often a good and necessary thing for a society to thrive. But we must always remain forewarned that leadership and authority is only able to truly succeed if a person is first filled with the humility, and the meekness and the lowliness of the heart of Christ.

The message for you and for me from these words today is simple, but demanding, “We must not reach for or grasp for our own personal greatness. But instead, we must be humble and allow God to be the one who lifts us up into the positions of leadership and authority.” Then we will surely succeed in all that we do.

In James chapter 4 we read

¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (James 4:10)

And in 1 Peter chapter 5 we read,

⁵ . . . All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”
⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. (1 Peter 5:5-6)

May we pray.