

Humble Greatness: Part 2

Luke 17:1-10

"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 18:4

Introduction: Our current culture is deficient in many areas pertaining to excellence and quality, but one of the areas that we excel in is the "pat on the back" industry. Take the entertainment industry. Without including some of the minor venues, there are at least **21 different Awards events** – the ones we know like the Oscars, Emmys (Daytime and Primetime, mind you), and Tony's, as well as Teen Choice, Kids Choice, People's choice, Spike Guys choice, Critics choice, Country music, American music, Academy of Country music, MTV music, Billboard music, and MTV Europe music, which each take place throughout the year, at a clip of nearly one every other week. Now, though there is nothing inherently wrong with acknowledging a job done well, these have captured the market on validating the pursuit of power, money, and sex by rewarding **strength, beauty, wealth, and charisma**. We can learn much of any culture by what we celebrate, finding out what is most valuable, and how one determines greatness.

This is nothing new. There has always been a desire among mankind to find validation in accomplishment, wanting to be seen and known by what one did, or possessed, or attained. We like awards, certificates, letters of commendation, and trophies. This is exactly what the **religious leaders of Jesus' day wanted**. In Matthew 23, Jesus exhorted the people around the Pharisees to do what they said as it pertained to the Law, but NOT to follow their example. ***"They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces, and being called rabbi by others."*** All of life was lived for the external, what could be seen by others, but had nothing to do with godly character. Their worth was based on honor received, even if that honor was forced, or the system created and self validated simply to pat each other on the back.

Not only does this system lead to hopeless misery (listen to some Oscar winners if they felt fulfilled after winning the top award in their field. They often feel MORE depressed after), but it flies in the face of what God values. We value what we can see, so we promote the external. God sees the heart, the motives, the hidden from view, the act of integrity that goes unnoticed by the crowd. The call to follow Christ is persistently one of **counter-culture**, meaning we not only DO things differently than the world, we **value** things differently. **When we promote ourselves, we diminish Christ and steal glory from God**, and God makes it abundantly clear that He does not play that game:

Isaiah 42:8 *I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.*

Isaiah 48:11 *For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.*

This is why Jesus said *"The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."* Matthew 23:11-12 This morning we continue in Luke 17 as we look at what God values as greatness in three areas: With each other in committing NOT to lead others into stumbling, but leading them out by rebuke followed by forgiveness. This is followed by recognizing our need for faith, and our call to serve. None of these is optional, nor are they possible apart from the grace of God given through faith.

Humility Needed for Loving Relationships (Luke 17:1-4)

And he said to his disciples, “**Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!** It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these **little ones** to sin. **Pay attention to yourselves!** If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

Before digging into this hard (by implication) text, there are two fundamental issues at play: **1)** As disciples of Jesus we share a common commitment to pursue righteousness and holiness. A person who claims to love God and yet has no desire to obey nor a care to change is NOT a true follower; **2)** We are not to pursue holiness and righteousness in isolation, but rather we are to walk together. This not only provides encouragement but also *mirrors*, where our heart is exposed in the interaction with others. We not only get to serve each other, we grow by dealing with each other's sin, resolving conflict, and learning to love.

Humble care not to lead anyone into sin

Jesus gave two overarching realities of temptations around us: **1) they will always be there, 2) they better not come from us.**

Humble connection to rebuke a brother

Not only are we called not to **lead others into sin, we actually are called to lead people OUT of it.** The first way we do this is to **rebuke or admonish a fellow believer.** Here Luke gives a principle of dealing with sin, where Matthew gave a **process** of how it is supposed to happen. This is not being judgmental nor is it being nitpicky toward people. It is a necessary result of being close together in relationships where sin will come out, often against each other. A few principles on rebuking each other:

- **The goal is to win a brother (Matt. 18:15) –**
- **The process is to start in private FIRST (Matt. 18:15)**
- **We only rebuke what is clearly seen and stands written (1 Cor. 4:1-6) –**
- **We remember that love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8; Prov. 10:12; 1 Cor. 13:5) –**
- **We look to ourselves at the same time (Galatians 6:1) –**

Humble conviction to truly forgive

Forgiveness is the choice to remember a sin no more, to hold a sin against another no more (Isaiah 43:25).

- **We forgive just like God forgave us (Eph. 4:32) –**
- **God is Offended by sin much more than we ever should be (Psalm 51) –**
- **I have been forgiven an unpayable debt (Matt. 18:23-35) –**
- **When I fail to forgive, God will not forgive me (Matt. 6:14-15)**
- **Lack of forgiveness is a sign that we fail to love - either God or others (Luke 7:47) –**
- **We leave the judgment of sin up to God (Rom. 12:19) - It is God's job and right to judge, condemn, and pour out wrath, not us.**

Humility Needed for Dependency (Luke 17:5-6)

The apostles said to the Lord, "**Increase our faith!**" And the Lord said, "**If you had faith** like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

Humble to recognize our weakness

The apostles, those sent out by Jesus who had followed Him closely and fervently, were reeling from this teaching and could only blurt out, "**Increase our faith!**" Do you ever feel like that? The call to follow Jesus is the call to die, the call to turn from self to trust Him, to discontinue living for this world. We are to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and refuse to take vengeance in our own hands. In other words, the call to follow Christ is **IMPOSSIBLE apart from faith**. On top of this, faith itself cannot be conjured up by ourselves but must be given by the gracious hand of God, making us dependent on Him for even that. We are consistently, everyday, weak in our own strength to fulfill what we are called to do. So the distinctive we are called to is admit and embrace the weakness, calling God to increase what He Himself has given.

For us, this is the equivalent of calling for grace. Grace is the means by which we believed in Jesus the first time (Eph. 2:8-9), and grace that allows us to continue to believe. God calls us to impossible things to show His glory, to humble us, and keep us dependant on Him. Forgiveness requires that kind of clinging to Him, continually calling out for the grace only our Dad supplies. When we call out, we are exercising trust in Him and humility toward Him. When we humble ourselves, He **promises to give us the grace we need so we can yield to Him**.

*James 4:6 - But He gives **more grace**. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Submit yourselves therefore to God."*

Humble to ask for greater faith

Now notice what Jesus reminded them. They did not need MORE faith, by quantity, since even the smallest of faith, like that of a mustard seed could make a deeply rooted tree to rip out of the ground. In other words, the disciples were NOT lacking enough faith given by God's grace, they simply needed to exercise the faith that had already been given to them. The disciples did what we often do, "**I can't do that!**" I can do a lot of different things, but I cannot do _____. **This is not about "can't", its about "won't"**. The way to grow, or increase, in faith is to exercise the earth shaking faith that has already been given to every believer. When we make truth informed, faith driven decisions each day, regardless of the discomfort or temporary pain, we grow in our ability to trust the Lord implicitly, whole-heartedly, and joyfully.

Taken in isolation, the idea of uprooting a mulberry tree and throwing it into the sea (or later in Mark 11:22 Jesus made the same comparison in Jerusalem, and said faith would allow us to throw a mountain into the sea - He was a master of using His surroundings to teach truth) appeals to us. We like the imagery because it seems powerful, like having some mutant, Magneto like strength to lift up buildings and toss them. We like the idea that faith is powerful, and out of this verse many have gone sideways on its implications. We can name something and claim it by faith, since Jesus said we could move mountains. We can name that house, region, person, etc and if we believe enough, it will be ours. But please, oh please, consider the context of this statement. On one end, the faith that moves mountains is the **faith that forgives**, and forgives, and forgives. On the other end, Jesus illustrates what **growing , dependant, humble faith produces: humble, continual, thankless, service! That is moving mountains type stuff!**

Humility Needed for Self Recognition (Luke 17:7-10)

“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

Humble to see our function as a servant

This brought Jesus to the final point of his long discourse, and he ended with a summation of the need for humility. Pride is so deceptive. Pride puts qualifications over the commands of God (I will do this only *if* _____), convinces ourselves that everyone else is wrong, and deceives us into thinking we are better than we are. So He told a story of a servant and owner to illustrate the function and mindset needed for a faith driven, forgiveness offering, willingly rebuking, and stumbling avoiding disciple. A servant worked in the field all day, every day. Each day he would work hard from sun up to sun down. At the end of the day he would enter back into the house and would be greeted with the familiar response, "**you stink! Go and change your clothes because I can't eat with that stench in my nostrils. Change so that you can serve me my dinner. When I am done, and only when I'm done, can you eat your dinner.**" No thanks given, no acknowledgement of work done, and no expectation that anything would change tomorrow.

This is our life. "**So you also...**" was Jesus summation of identity. We are servants. Specifically, we are HIS SERVANTS. We serve, following His commands because He has bought us, purchasing us with His blood, and He owns our life. In this life, we are not looking for acclaim or praise, but by faith believe that **WILL COME** (well done, good and faithful servant - Matt. 25:21). But as for today, we serve for the joy of honoring our King. We serve without expectation of reward today, even thanks. How often are we upset when we do something and NO ONE EVEN THANKS US. For a counter-cultural follower of Jesus, we are not seeking the temporal reward but the eternal one.

Humble to keep the mindset of a servant

But Jesus goes on to say that we not only serve, we do so because we are **unworthy servants**, doing only what we ought to have done. Notice that Jesus calls out our position, who we are, and by doing so calls out our identity. An **unworthy servant is WHO WE ARE, and that is who we are in this life!** We never outgrow this status, but by faith we embrace it more and more, causing greater joy and effectiveness. Our life is a perpetual result of God's lavish love, grace, and mercy. We are not seeking honor and praise in this life, knowing that we will dine with the King in the future. When we embrace this mindset, forgiveness becomes possible. We care about others in a way that goes beyond what they can do for us. We are not easily offended because we know what we truly deserve. We are quick to love, quick to give grace, quick to cover an offense, and quick to grant mercy. This is distinctive living from a distinctive gospel.

A few principles to consider for ourselves as a result of this:

- **There is a security in being a servant** - In our mindset, a servant would be a negative connotation, but being a servant offered more security than a day laborer who was never sure if there would be a job for him. Being a servant of the King offers us the greatest identity and positional reality that one can have in this life. Being a servant of the King is the greatest calling, the pinnacle of accomplishment, and most valued reality. We serve God by serving each other, and that continually.

*As each has received a gift, use it to **serve one another**, as good stewards of God's **varied grace**: whoever **speaks**, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever **serves**, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.* **1 Peter 4:11-12**

Whether this is our reality in our home with our spouse and kids, or serving others in the church, or serving in the community/workplace, the principles are the same. We speak and serve, and neither originates with us - the oracles we speak is God's, and the service we offer is from the strength God supplies. And this is done so **God will be glorified. That is what is at stake in our service.** If this is true, then God will always give us the strength to do what's seemingly impossible, to summon the energy to continue at the end of the night when we feel like we've given it all, and can love someone who on the outside does not deserve it.

- **We never outgrow a life of service** - Most jobs we have change in scope over time. We start out doing grunt work, but then are able to pass that down the line as we move up. Even parents roles change as children get older, are able to do more on their own, and one day take care of us. But a servant mindset never changes, and in fact, should only grow. **A sure sign of maturity in Christ is a LARGER view of personal servanthood, NOT a diminishing one.** We are called to serve with our life until our life is no more.
- **There is no honor needed in this life** - Notice the servant was not thanked for his service, nor special acclaim given for him doing his job, his duty. Since we have bought into the cultural norm of "back slapping", we have come to expect some sort of recognition for what we do. How many times have we heard the phrase, "**We did _____ for them, and we didn't EVEN GET A THANK YOU???!!!!**" Christ's servant operates by faith, faith in the fact that there will be a reward, and it will be FUTURE. God sees and knows all, and His rewards come according to His value system. **Think about the reasons we fail to serve in this way:**
 - **I want someone to notice all that I've done** - This is simply called good business in our jobs, where we serve others so they will see and recognize. Our calling is much higher. Service is not only the means, but the end. We serve because God sees and is pleased. If others see, then we take it as a gracious bonus. How does that affect how you approach your marriage, or service in this church?
 - **I want something in return (What's in it for me?)** - How often has a husband done something kind and sweet for his spouse with the expectation of something afterward: acknowledgement, intimacy, etc? How often have we served expecting promotion or a position, or a thank you? When we adopt the mindset of a slave, we serve in a way that takes **everything else as a gracious gift.** In other words, if our service is acknowledged, or responded to, or thanked, its by a gracious hand, **not something that was expected or deserved. This will radically change our life as a servant if we let it.**
 - **I don't think I have any more to give** - This is when we stop operating by the grace available to us and instead simply operate in the flesh. The truth is, WE cannot give more,, but God always gives greater grace.
 - **I don't believe I can (Or "I can't")** - Which is simply another way of saying we do not believe the promises of God. God never gives a command to us that He doesn't also

empower us to do. What is lacking most often in all of us is a refusal to see our life in this world through the lens of **death** and our need for God's grace as **desperate**.

On the Tuesday of the Passion week, Jesus was approached by some Greeks who wished to see Jesus. Because the time for Him to be lifted up on the cross was close, He responded:

*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and **dies**, it remains alone; **but if it dies, it bears much fruit**. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone **serves me, he must follow me**; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, **the Father will honor him**. **John 12:24-26***

What is required for growing faith? Death. We must lose our life in this world to truly gain it in the next. When we function from a position of loss and death, we can truly see ourselves in light of who we are: servants of the King.

In 1990, **Robertson McQuilkin** resigned the presidency of Colombia Bible College and its graduate school in order to care fulltime for his wife Muriel, who was suffering from Alzheimer's. For the next 13 years, he cared for his wife who could no longer function as his wife the way she had for 40 years before. At his resignation, he stated, "I haven't in my life experienced easy decision making on major decisions, but one of the simplest and clearest decisions I've had to make is this one, because circumstances dictated it. Muriel now, in the last couple of months, seems to be almost happy whne with me, and almost never happy when not with me. In fact, she seems ot feel trapped, becomes very fearful, sometimes almost terror, and when she can't get to me there can be anger, she's in distress. But when I'm with her she's happy and contented, so I must be with her at all times...and you see, its not only that I promised in sickness and in health, til death do us part, and I'm a man of my word. But as I have said, its the only fair thing. She sacrificed for me for 40 years to make my life possible...so if I cared for her for 40 years, I'd still be in debt. However, there's much more. And its not that I **HAVE to, its that I GET to**. I love her very dearly. She's a delight. And its a great honor to care for such a wonderful person"

At Muriel's funeral, he said, "For 55 years Muriel was flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. So its like a ripping of my flesh and deeper --- my very bones. But there is also profound gratitude. For ten years I've delighted in recalling happy memories. I still do. No regrets. I'm grateful." He died on June 2, 2016, at the age of 88. He was faithful to the end.¹

What's amazing about this story is that it should not be extraordinary. It should be normative for every humble servant who walks by faith. Dr. McQuilkin understood that he was an unworthy servant who had done only that which he ought to have done. Would the same be said of us?

¹ Justin Taylor, blogs.thegospelcoalition.org, "In Sickness and in Health: A Man of His Word, June 2, 2016