

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 14 November

Children's Talk: What You Have Been Given

What does it mean to be humble? What does it mean to be arrogant? Being humble means that you realize the good things about other people and you put them first. Being arrogant means you think that you are better than everyone else.

But sometimes we get confused about how to be humble and think that it means we should pretend that because other people are better than us, that we shouldn't even try to make a difference. After all, if other people are better, what is the point of us doing something poorly?

But that is not at all how the Lord wants us to think. It is true that we all have different talents, skills, and abilities, and that someone will always be able to do something better. But even if we only have a little, the Lord still wants us to use what we do have to make the world a better place. He showed this with a parable about a master who gave each of his servants a certain amount of money and went on a journey. When he came home he wanted to know what each servant had done with the money.

So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' He also who had received two talents came and said, "Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'

But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. (Matthew 25:20-28)

Not every servant was given the same amount of money: one got 5, the next 2, the third only 1. The servant who was given only 1 talent may have thought of how little it was, especially in comparison to the one given 5. He may have thought how little he could make from it. So he decided to simply bury the money. That seems very humble, doesn't it?

But the master was not happy at all! He wished the servant had done something with the money, even if it was only to grow it just a little bit! It did not matter that he never could have made as much as the other two servants. All that mattered was that he could have done something with what he had been given.

That is true humility: even though we can see that others might do better than us, or have more, or make more of a difference, the Lord still wants us to do our part with the little that we have. Knowing that the Lord has given us special skills and talents is not arrogant. We don't have to be better than anyone in order to make a difference.

Misplaced Humility

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

14 November, 2021

Today our focus is on humility. Humility is a crucial characteristic to foster in our relationship with the Lord. As we will see it is in fact necessary for us to be humble in order to receive anything of value from Him. But our focus is not so much going to be on humility itself as it is going to be on how we can get it slightly off. There is a way of being humble, or trying to be humble, that ends up causing harm. It's when we take humility to mean a kind of self-loathing or feeling of utter worthlessness. As we start exploring this topic it will quickly become apparent why we might go there: it seems to be what the Word teaches, and so we will sit with that for a bit. But I want to be clear from the start that we are not going to end there. This sermon will end focused on a kind of humility that is uplifting, joyful, and freeing. Make sure you don't get stuck in the early, depressing parts and so miss out on what comes after.

There are countless passages we could point to in the Word that speak to the need for humility. The one we will start with is a story that Jesus told about a Pharisee and a tax collector, both of whom went to the temple to connect with God:

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

At first glance we might simply assume that the Pharisee was wrong about himself, that had he truly been righteous there would have been nothing wrong with his prayer. Yet Jesus' concluding line negates that interpretation: *everyone* who exalts himself will be humbled. Even the most righteous individual, presumably, should adopt the attitude of the tax collector: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

The nature of humanity is such that abject humility is the only possible position we can take in relation to the Lord. Next to the Lord what we bring to the table pales into nothing. Now I'm going to share a passage from the Teachings of the New Church that puts this quite harshly. Before I even read it though I want to again mention that this is not the end point, but simply one stop along the way. Just as a single note in isolation cannot create music, a single truth in isolation cannot reveal the full picture. But here is what one passage states about a humble and correct view of oneself:

Mutual love however, which alone is heavenly, consists in not only saying but also acknowledging and believing that one is utterly undeserving, and something worthless and filthy, which the Lord in His infinite mercy is constantly drawing away and holding back from the hell into which the person

constantly tries, and indeed longs, to cast himself. He acknowledges and believes this because it is the truth. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1594)

Not only does that sound harsh, it runs contrary to what many people in the modern world believe about self-esteem. How on earth could a loving God ask us to believe this about ourselves?

On the surface it seems that this kind of self-view would lead to all sorts of awful behaviour. If one is worthless, why bother trying or putting any effort into life? If a husband for example truly believes that there is nothing he can do to improve his marriage he might not bother to work on any sort of growth. If he believes he has nothing to offer his wife he may withhold from her exactly what she needs from him. When someone believes he is undeserving he may even feel guilt for any pleasure he experiences and may even seek out painful experiences. Some people have been so convinced that this is what God wants for them that they have inflicted physical harm on themselves as a way of honouring God. Others have repudiated all worldly pleasure.

I hope it is clear from the way that I am speaking that none of these things are what the Lord wants for us. The title of this sermon is “Misplaced Humility,” and I believe that is exactly what I have just described. That is not real humility, or at least it is not the humility that the Lord seeks. Again, a single truth cannot give the full picture any more than a single note makes a song. One qualifier that must be added is that the Lord wants us to acknowledge the reality of our human nature *for our own sake*. The Lord has no interest whatsoever in inflicting misery on us for the fun of it, nor even because of some notion that He deserves it. When we see ourselves as we truly are we can then realize just what it is that we need from the Lord.

That brings me to the second qualifier: on our own, we are nothing; yet we are not on our own. The very passage that I just quoted carries on to make it quite clear that within us is something amazing from the Lord. It uses the language of “the internal man.” This is a way of talking about the part of us that is at the very core of our being, as opposed to “the external man,” or the more outward parts of ourselves.

The things that belong to the internal man are the Lord's, so that one may say that the internal man is the Lord. Yet because the Lord grants an angel or man, so long as his life has mutual love in it, a heavenly proprium so that he has no idea but that he does good from himself, an internal man is therefore attributed to a person as though it were his own. The person in whom mutual love dwells however acknowledges and believes that everything good and true is not his own but the Lord's. He acknowledges and believes that his ability to love another as himself - and if he is like the angels, more than himself - is a gift from the Lord and that he ceases to enjoy that gift and its happiness to the extent he departs from acknowledging that it is the Lord's. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1594)

None of us can do any good whatsoever on our own. But the whole point of acknowledging that reality is so that we can take in goodness and truth from the Lord and then share that goodness and truth with the world around us. The Lord is so deeply present within us that when we act from love, it's as if the Lord Himself is taking the place of self.

Nor is this a technicality that we don't get to sense. That passage mentioned being given a heavenly proprium from the Lord. “Proprium” is Latin for what belongs

to a person, the sense of self, the sensation of autonomy and independent action. Although the Lord is the one who gives us to do anything good, and He wants us to acknowledge this for our own sakes, He also wants us to feel like we do do good things.

When humility goes awry it's often because we get the first half of the equation (that on our own we are nothing) but miss the second half: that the Lord actually wants us to feel a sense that we can make a difference, and a sense of accomplishment when we do. If we reject those things, we are actually rejecting what is the Lord's within us. Or another way of putting that, often times when we are self-deprecating we are actually deprecating the Lord. What looks like self-loathing may very well be loathing the Lord's creation. When a husband believes that he is so utterly worthless as to have nothing to offer his wife in their marriage, he is denying what the Lord has gifted him in terms of knowledge, insight, skills, motivation, love, care, compassion, and infinitely more heavenly things. When someone believes that he is unworthy of any and all enjoyments, he is throwing away the very gift that the Lord wants to give to him.

So what does angelic humility look and feel like? First of all, if humility means acknowledging that any and all goodness one possesses is from the Lord alone, it becomes all that much more important to put those good things to use. If goodness is my own, then it's up to me whether I use it or not; but if goodness is the Lord's, then it was given with a purpose and a reason, and I must apply myself to make use of it. This kind of humility may look far different from the quiet smallness we associate with humility. The person who is truly humble may exuberantly jump into action to serve the Lord and others. He may be a mover and a shaker, someone who at times is loud and clear in his intentions. Humility may indeed look like the opposite of what we expect. What matters is the heart that lies behind it, and a humble heart can be just as active as a proud one.

One way to tell if we have reached this true humility is to simply observe how we feel in acknowledging that nothing is ours and all is the Lord's. Initially it is depressing to realize how little we offer and how much it is all the Lord's. It is a struggle to hold on to this acknowledgment in the face of accomplishments achieved and challenges overcome. But if it remains a sad, depressing, and discouraging thought then perhaps we are missing something. The Lord's goal is joy:

The person who is being regenerated is brought at length, through the repeated experiences of desolation and sustainment, to a point at which he no longer wishes to be his own man but the Lord's. And once he has become the Lord's he passes into a state in which, if left to himself, he is dejected and gripped by anxiety. But when he is brought out of that state he returns to the bliss and happiness that are his, to the kind of state all the angels experience. The Lord desires any person's total submission so that He can make him blissful and happy. (*Secrets of Heaven* §6138)

There is joy and freedom in forgetting about self and simply submitting to the Lord. The angels are in this joy constantly. The paradox is that in pursuing our own happiness and focusing entirely on self we lose the very happiness we seek; and yet in submitting fully to the Lord we find a happiness that surpasses what we sought for ourselves. Dwelling on our own inadequacy to the detriment of others is just as self-focused as dwelling on our supposed accomplishments to the detriment of others.

So what then does true humility mean? It does mean recognizing that on our own we are nothing, and the Lord is everything. But connected with that it means recognizing that with the Lord we can be a vessel of His love and wisdom in the world. The one who is truly humble will not shrink from making a difference for others and changing the world. Humility breaks us free of self-doubt and insecurities, and opens us to the possibilities that the Lord intends for our lives. With God, all things are possible; including real contentment with who He has created us to be:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
And uphold me by Your generous Spirit. (Psalm 51:10-12)