

TITLE: "Those Who Humble Themselves Will Be Exalted"

TEXT: Matthew 5:1-11 The Beatitudes (NT p. 4)

Introduction – God chooses the humble

If we look at the people in the Bible who God used to do AMAZING things, there is an interesting pattern. As I read this list, see if you can pick it out:

Moses murdered a guard and had a speech impediment.

Job went bankrupt.

Jonah ran away from God.

Rahab was a prostitute.

David had an affair with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband.

Peter denied Christ.

Paul put Christians in jail.

What is the pattern? ...The people God used were far from perfect. In fact, most were completely unqualified to do what God asked them to do.

So, why did God chose these people? ...Because they were humble. The truth is that God uses, and blesses, humble people. So this morning I am preaching on humility as well as the complete opposite of humility, which is pride.

1. Only the humble find God

I am always moved when an American wins an Olympic gold medal, stands on the center podium and the National Anthem is played. When interviewed, athletes often tell of the years of hard practice, battling back from injuries and heartbreaking losses. But now, they stand in front of their country, their family and their friends and relish being the best in the world in that particular sport.

I want you to contrast that image with the one Jesus presents in the Beatitudes:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

The Olympic gold medal is a symbol of pride and accomplishment. I will never win a gold medal at the Olympics, that's for sure, but seeing these committed athletes does make me want to excel at something. The last couple weeks, I have been thinking about what GOD wants us to excel at and what I came up with is HUMILITY. Humility is what Jesus is trying to convey through the beatitudes and if God was awarding gold medals, the humblest person would be standing on the central podium.

2. Pride and self-esteem

It's not easy to be humble. Even though we may never experience a gold medal being hung around our necks, there is something in life, some ability, skill or accomplishment that each of us has, for which we are proud. It may be an education, a job, a home, physical condition, golf handicap, garden, knowledge of a topic, clothes or even how much you can accomplish in a day. We each can do things for which we are proud.

"Oh come on, Dave, you're not going to tell me this is wrong are you? ...Yes I am. ...I am NOT saying that we should have no self-esteem. That's a double negative, so let me put more clearly: We ARE to have self-esteem. But we are not to have pride. What's the difference between the two? Pride exalts in what I am able to do. Self-esteem exalts in who I am as a person. For a Christian, self-esteem goes deeper. For the Christian, self-esteem exalts in who I am because of God.

In Jeremiah 9:23, 24, God says: "Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord."

When we are in a place of pride in ourselves and our own accomplishments, we distance ourselves from the Lord. That is why Jesus says: "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." When we are proud, when we are self-sufficient, we cannot be close to God.

This is just the OPPOSITE of what many popular ministers preach. They preach pride and self-confidence and guarantee success if you believe in yourself. Jesus promises that God will take care of your needs, but it is NOT through pride. Jesus says, "Seek FIRST the kingdom of God and GOD'S righteousness, and all the things you need will be added to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

I enjoy the Olympics, don't get me wrong, but to me, the most courageous people never stand on a podium and receive a medal. A man I used to know admitted that he was powerless to overcome his addiction to alcohol, went through the 12 step program in Alcoholics Anonymous and began to rely on God to help him in his struggle each and every day. After becoming a successful businessman he would say, "Without God and AA, I would be dead, so I give the glory to God for everything I do." Over the years he helped dozens of others with the same addiction.

Pride points to me. Humility points to God. I'm not saying it's easy to be humble. But it's not all that easy to have pride either. Pride is illusive. If you win a gold medal, what do you do next? Do you try to repeat the performance in the next Olympics? Pride that comes from personal accomplishment always needs to be reinforced with new accomplishments.

If we are humble, we know that God loves us for who we ARE and NOT for what we DO. The key to staying humble is to stay close to Jesus. When we are close to the Lord, and receive his love and appreciation, we can have self-esteem and still stay humble. The choice is ours to make: either we spend time and effort building ourselves up or we spend time and effort staying close to the Lord.

3. Pride and judgment

If you want to know how much pride you have, observe how you judge others.

Do you judge by how a person wears her hair?

What kind of car they drive?

How they speak?

What their home looks like outside or in?

Do you judge a person by their education, or lack thereof?

How a person eats?

The clothes they wear?

How they play a sport you are also good at?

Check it out. I am constantly amazed how FULL of pride I am. I encourage you to do what I do when I realize my pride: I confess my sin of pride to God and beg forgiveness. I have to do this a LOT.

4. Pride and putting others first

Listen these words of Jesus (Luke 14:7-11):

When [Jesus] noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Here's my challenge for the third week of Lent: Start putting other people first. Call up a needy friend or relative and just listen. Let another person go ahead of you at the checkout line. Give some money to a panhandler the next time you are in Ithaca. Listen to the person at work the others avoid. If you put others first, you will find that God will use you to help others and you will be blessed beyond belief. Here's a story...

A teacher in New York asked each one of her high school seniors to the front of the class one at a time and told each of them how they had made a difference to her and the class. Then she presented each of them with a blue ribbon imprinted with gold letters that read "Who I Am Makes a Difference."

Afterward, the teacher gave each student three blue ribbons, and instructed them to go out and give them to those who had made a difference in their lives. They were to follow up, see who honored whom, and report to the class in a week.

One of the boys went to a junior executive in a nearby company and honored him for helping him with his career planning. He gave him a blue ribbon and pinned it on his shirt. Then he gave him two extra ribbons and said, "We're doing a class project on recognition and we'd like you to find someone to honor and give that person a blue ribbon."

Later that day, the junior executive went to see his boss, who had a reputation of being a grouch. He said that he deeply admired him for being a creative genius. The boss seemed very surprised as he pinned one of the blue ribbons on his jacket right above his heart. Then he offered him the last ribbon and said, "Would you take this extra ribbon and pass it on to somebody else?"

That night, the boss came home and sat down with his 14-year-old son. He said, "As I was driving home, I started thinking about who I would honor and I thought about you. I want to honor you. My days are hectic and when I come home, I don't pay a lot of attention to you. I yell at you for not getting good enough grades and

for your messy bedroom. But somehow tonight, I just wanted to sit here and, well, just let you know that you DO make a difference to me. Besides your mother, you are the most important person in my life. You're a great kid and I love you!"

...The boy started to cry. His whole body shook. After a while, he looked up at his father and said, "Dad, earlier tonight I sat in my room and wrote a letter to you and Mom, explaining why I had taken my life and asked you to forgive me. I was going to commit suicide tonight after you went to sleep. I just didn't think you cared at all. The letter is upstairs. I don't think I'll need it after all."

The boss went back to work a changed man. He was no longer a grouch and he made sure to let his employees know that they each made a difference. The junior executive helped many other young people with career planning, one being the boss's son, and never forgot to let them know they made a difference in his life.

Conclusion –

This week, humble yourself before God. Be MEEK before Jesus. Get your self-esteem from your relationship with God who loves you for who you are, not for what you do. Confess pride and judgment. Put others first. If you do, God will use you to help others in amazing ways and God will bless you more than you can ever imagine.

Amen.

Matthew 5:1-11

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."