

Taking the Road of Faith: Charting Character -- Humility

Lessons: Proverbs 15:31-33(NIV); Matthew 18:1-4 (NIV)

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs%2015:31-33;%20Matthew%2018:1-4>

Takeaway1 (series): Character is what makes taking the road of faith possible: it is the spine of the body of Christ.

Takeaway2 (message): True humility is worshiping God as God; assessing yourself accurately; being teachable.

It is a tough time to be a celebrity. From Michael Richards and Mel Gibson exposing their racist underbellies, to Reverend Ted Haggard and Representative Mark Foley exposing their actual underbellies, to the lies and disinformation oozing out of the all the President's men (and women), celebrities have a tough time keeping their secrets secret.

It's hard to keep your real self to yourself when the world is watching. Eventually, the content of your character spills out. Your façade melts or shatters, and the person you really are is on display for all to see. Your real character becomes known.

And the world is watching. Even if you live alone, with no webcam, no neighbors, and no cat, God is watching. I don't say that to scare you; it's just a fact. We live with and among each other; we live with and amidst God. We are not alone in this world, which means that the content of our character matters, because who we are in our real lives matters. Who we are when we think no one is looking, matters, because every day we are formed by who we are in our real lives. And the world cannot avoid being shaped by us.

If we are taking the road of faith, our character shapes what that road looks like, and how hard it is. The weaker your character, the harder the road. The strength of your character, more than events, more than challenges or gains, the strength of your character determines how you experience your life.

As followers of Jesus, we cannot afford to try to avoid this truth about character. For the followers of Jesus are intimately and permanently connected. If you think of all of the followers of Jesus from Simon Peter until you, from Palestine to China to Chile to Campbell, together we make up the body of Christ. It is our individual character, and our character as a church that is the spine of that body. Your character is the spine of the body of Christ. If you don't have a spine, the body falls down on the road of faith. Having a spine, having a strong Christlike character, makes the spiritual body healthy and strong.

We're going to be spending the next 5 weeks working on our personal character, and on the character of this body of Christ.

Please look at the back of your bulletin, or at the screens. These are the core values of this body of Christ, this church. (SLIDE) Read them with me: extravagant joy; passionate faith; loving respect; deep connectedness; intentional growth; shared laughter.

This is our spine as a community of followers of Jesus. These core values are the basis for our accountability to each other. Along with our unity in baptism, and the purposes handed to us by Jesus as his church, this is how we keep each other real, and make sure that the kind of people we are in our real lives would make God proud. Because no one in the body of Christ is alone. We live with and among each other; we live with and amidst God.

As individuals and the church, our goal in taking the road of faith, as the apostle Paul put it in Philippians 2:5, is to grow in our resemblance to Christ Jesus. (SLIDE) Our goal is to adopt the character of Christ, to become more like Christ: Godly and human, full of grace on the inside, and living it out on the outside.

These vertebrae of character are sometimes known as virtues. There are a number of them cited in Scripture, but for the next 5 weeks we're going to concentrate on a few that really contribute to our developing not only a character that won't embarrass us, but better - a Christlike character. (SLIDE) Developing a character of humility, justice, integrity, honesty and gratitude will take you a long way toward resembling Christ, and will sustain you on the road of faith.

Humility is the foundational value for a Christlike character. Do you want to take the road of faith? Do you want to resemble Christ? Work on being humble; aspire to true humility. If character is the spine of the body of Christ, humility is the spinal cord.

So what is humility: Scripture gives us at least three distinct qualities of Christlike humility.

1) "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

Here is the first principle of true humility: there is a God; and it isn't you.

A lot of us say that there is a God, but we do everything in our power to usurp God's place in the world. We downsize God and supersize ourselves.

Let me give you just one example of how we do this - how we downsize God and supersize ourselves - you can probably think of a hundred more. When we talk about God on Sunday mornings, do we emphasize the grandeur, glory, power and awesomeness of God? Or do we try to make God seem like the guy next door?

It's great and appropriate to try to understand and know God. God came to us as Jesus so that we might know God better. But it's really easy to go from trying to understand God to trying to minimize God. We minimize God by thinking of God as the same size we are. God as brother. God as friend. God as lover.

All of those things are true, but the bigger truth is this: God is God, the creator of the universe, the sustainer of all things, the power and the glory forever and ever. Any God smaller than that isn't worthy of our respect, and any God that size or bigger deserves not only our friendship and our following, but our worship.

That's why that famous verse in Deuteronomy, the foundational verse of all of Judaism, known as the shema, says "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." To love God with everything you are, and all you are, is worship. If we have any less than a worshipful, obeisant, response to God, we have downsized God and supersized ourselves.

We worship Jesus Christ for the same reason: to remember to be humble in the presence of the One who was and is God incarnate, God in flesh. Worshiping Christ is practicing the first principle of humility.

Even Jesus himself practiced this principle of humility. Scripture tells us Jesus went regularly to the temple for worship, and we see him give thanks offerings and praise. The apostle Paul said that Jesus humbled himself, and became obedient to God to the point of death on a cross. Though he was the son of God, Jesus was humble: he worshiped God and obeyed God's call.

Living out your purpose and obeying God's call leads us to the second principle of humility.

2) Honest and true self-assessment, coupled with using the gifts you've been given and getting support in your flaws and failings. This second principle of humility is referenced in all those places where the Apostle Paul talks about our spiritual gifts, and how each one has a place in the body of Christ. In Romans 12:3-5, Paul writes "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

To be humble, to live with Christlike humility, we have to understand that we are dependent upon one another – my gifts and strengths support your fragilities; your gifts and strengths support mine. That means we have to honestly assess and admit aloud where both our strengths and weaknesses are.

This is why in this community we've really been pushing every single person to be in a relationship of true Christian accountability. Whether you're in an accountability partnership, a prayer triad, or a deep small group, being in humble assessment with others strengthens your character. To put on the character of Christ, to develop true humility, we need to be with people to whom we can admit both our successes and our failures, and be supported in both.

One more word about this aspect of humility: false humility is almost as bad as arrogance. The Bible condemns false humility too. When we tell ourselves we're no good, or refuse to live into our gifts, we lie both about ourselves and about God. When we deny our gifts or denigrate ourselves, we diminish this wonderful and glorious creation of God's. Which violates the first principle of humility we talked about. We cannot denigrate and diminish God's creation – including ourselves, or others, without denigrating and diminishing God in our hearts.

3) The third principle of humility is reflected in Scripture in the lessons Faith read to us today. Jesus tells his disciples that whoever humbles himself like a little child will be among the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

What does it mean to humble yourself like a little child? Little children don't understand that there is one God, and it's not them. Little children aren't particularly good at honest and clear self-assessment and use of their gifts. They are learning that, but they're not there yet. Little children are actually pretty self-satisfying creatures: they don't sacrifice themselves for others, like Jesus did.

What little children are good at – in fact, what they are really really good at – is learning. Little children are perfect learners. They are completely open to learning, want to learn, and want to learn how to do something well. Little children are humble in the sense that they are utterly teachable. They have very few illusions that they are better at something than you are, but they also don't start out by thinking they're terrible at things, either. They're neither arrogant nor self-deprecating. They're just teachable.

Jesus was also teachable. We think of him as having all the answers, but in Mark 7 and Matthew 15, Jesus shows that he too, even the Son of God, was teachable. A woman – a non-Jew – comes to him and asks for healing for her daughter. Jesus snaps at her and tries to send her away, but she responds to him and corrects him. And we see Jesus learn, change his mind, and in Matthew, commend her for her faith. He learns. The savior of the world, the Son of God, learned.

That's what today's lesson from Proverbs is about, too: "The one who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise." That is, if you listen and heed instruction that gives you better life, you will be wise. You gain understanding.

The Proverb goes on, and touches on the other two principles of humility: "He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding." That's the honest self-assessment part, the using of your gifts and gaining support for your weaknesses.

And then Proverbs says, "The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor." There is a God, one God, and it's not you. Learning that takes you straight out onto the road of faith.

I want to say one more thing about humility: humility may be the foundational value for a Christlike character, but it doesn't come easily. At the beginning of this message today I mentioned the recent fall of a number of famous people. Not having character will destroy you and those around you; and many of us have to experience spiritual destruction in order to find new life. Many of us have to be rattled to the marrow of our bones to discover humility.

For some of us the road to humble faith passes right through humiliation. For some of us, and at some times in our lives, learning to see ourselves in accurate perspective requires being brought low to where we feel unable to function. In those times, with God standing with us, we are stripped of our facades and our defenses. Being exposed – displaying that stark gap between our shattered egos and the glory of the God – can give us room that allows us to grow our lives. The discovery of our falsehood and our failure can give us the possibility of taking a new road.

When we watch the spectacular collapse of celebrities and politicians from afar, or when we experience the collapse of our own selves, we may be seeing the genesis of character, the basis for a humility. When we allow ourselves to be humble – by worshiping God, by assessing and using our gifts (and getting support in our weakness), and becoming truly teachable people – we develop the character of Christ, and the spine to be the people of God we are called to be.

This week, practice humility. Be humble, as Jesus was humble. And see how God's grace shines through you and shapes the world.

Lessons

This morning I'll be reading from the New International Version translation of the Bible. The NIV is the translation used in the Bibles that are waiting in the foyer for you to take home.

Our first Scripture lesson this morning is from the first book of the New Testament, known as the Gospel according to Matthew. Turn in your Bible to Matthew, chapter 18, verse 1.

(Give people a minute to find it.)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Our second lesson is from the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. Proverbs is found immediately after the book of Psalms. I'll be reading from chapter 15, verses 31 through 33.

(Give people a minute to find it.)

He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding. The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor.