

“Learning about Humility from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount”\*\*

Welcome fellow pilgrims! We continue today on a journey we began two weeks ago, a journey towards becoming people who walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Is the trek easy? No. It’s more grueling than running a marathon with a backback. Is it worth it? Absolutely. Ponder this statement by John Stott:

**“At every stage of our Christian development pride is our greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend.” --John Stott**

That’s not an overstatement either. Pride is our *greatest enemy* for pride is at the heart of every other sin, and humility is our *greatest friend* for the Scriptures declare:

**“God gives grace to the humble.” James 4:6**

Humility is the key that unlocks the storehouse door to the limitless supply of God’s amazing and life-transforming grace. Yes, humility is our greatest friend.

Sadly, pride is often excused (if not endorsed) and humility is seldom promoted, even in churches. In his book *Humility: True Greatness*, C. J. Mahaney shares a story that captured my attention:

“A few years ago our church— Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg , Maryland —celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. As we gathered on this occasion to rejoice together, Gary Ricucci, who’s part of our pastoral team and one of the church’s founding pastors, stood before us to present an overview of our history. He observed that though much had changed over the previous twenty-five years—such as the physical appearance of certain pastors like myself —the particular values that were present at our church’s inception had remained unchanged.

“Listening intently to Gary that morning was a church member and small-group leader named Jim. Before attending Covenant Life, he’d been a part of a congregation where, regretfully, a serious church split had taken place. As he listened to Gary describe our church’s enduring values, Jim’s mind was busy comparing these with the values evident in his former church. ‘Why was my experience so different?’ Jim wondered.

“He heard Gary affirm that, right from the beginning, Covenant Life Church had a love for God’s Word.

And Jim said to himself, *Yes, we had that.*

Gary continued, ‘We were in love with Jesus Christ and grateful for His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross.’

*Yes, Jim thought, we had that, too.*

‘We loved grace, and we loved worship.’

*Yep, had that.*

‘We believed in the importance of relationships,’ Gary added.

Once again Jim inwardly responded, *Okay, we had that.*

Then Gary said, ‘And there was a strong emphasis on humility, especially among the leaders.’

And Jim thought, *Nope. That we did not have.*[\[2\]](#)

Unfortunately, Jim’s experience isn’t isolated. Far too many churches, including Bible-teaching, righteousness-promoting ones, get a failing grade when it comes to humility. How are we doing?

May God help us to be a church that *truly values humility*, starting with our leadership and throughout, to be people who are taking tangible steps to put on humility by the grace of God. Without humility we may be able to impress the world with our programs but we’ll never experience the help of God, for *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble—and only to the humble.*

Humility isn’t just a good idea. It’s essential to our calling, a point Jesus emphasized in the Sermon on the Mount.

I’ve studied the Sermon on the Mount many times but recently, while on our humility pilgrimage, something struck me. Jesus had a lot to say about pride and humility in the Sermon on the Mount!

The setting is significant. According to Matthew 5:1 the crowds were after Jesus. There are lots of reasons people come to Jesus, not all of them God-pleasing either. Jesus walked up on a mountainside, sat down, and began to address His disciples, apparently with the crowd eavesdropping. He gave them a crash course, “Discipleship 101,” in essence saying, “If you want to follow Me, here’s what’s involved.”

My aim today is to do an overview of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, paying particular attention to what He taught about pride and humility. To His disciples as well as to would-be disciples, the Lord Jesus communicated three vital lessons, each having to do with humility.

### Lesson #1: In order to enter God’s kingdom, I need humility (5:1-20).

The very first words out of the Master’s mouth underscore the need for humility:

5:3 “Blessed are **the poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Who qualifies for God’s kingdom? What Jesus says is astounding. He states that requirement #1 is *poverty*, spiritual poverty. To be blessed, to possess the kingdom, you must be *needy*. You must be *lacking*. You must *have nothing*.

You say, “Sounds easy then to enter God’s kingdom! All you need is nothing!” But that’s our problem. We don’t want to admit we have nothing. We see ourselves as good, decent people, worthy of God’s attention and blessing. Why? Because we have a fundamental problem. It’s called *pride*. From the outset Jesus hits our problem head-on.

You say, “I don’t understand. How exactly does a person enter the kingdom?” As we listen to Jesus we

discover the answer. To enter God's kingdom I must admit three things.

## To enter God's kingdom I must admit that...

### A. I lack what God requires (5:1-12).

Jesus begins with eight beatitudes, eight indicators of who has the blessing of God on their lives. As with the ten commandments, there are two categories in this listing. Beatitudes 1-4 identify how the blessed person views his relationship *with God*, whereas beatitudes 5-8 focus on how he relates *to people*. Here are the first four characteristics of God's kind of person:

#1 *The poor in spirit*

#2 *Those who mourn*

#3 *The meek*

#4 *Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*

Those four marks tell us how the blessed person sees himself. He sees himself as *poor in spirit*. God's kingdom is not for the self-sufficient movers and shakers of the world. It's not for the self-made man. You have to admit you're spiritually bankrupt to get in.

What happens when you're gripped by your sinfulness? You *mourn*. And not just about your own sin but the dreadful consequences of living in a sin-cursed world.

Furthermore, Jesus says that the *meek* are blessed. That word doesn't mean "weak" but by definition means "power under control." The meek person doesn't live for his rights, for he recognizes that he is a servant who lives to please another, his Master and King.

It's not surprising that such a person *hungers and thirsts* for something. What's that? Jesus says it's *righteousness*. If you're hungry, it's because you lack food. If you're thirsty, it's because you lack water. The blessed person hungers and thirsts because he knows he lacks something, *righteousness*. He knows he does not have what it takes to be right with God. Since 1 Corinthians 1:30 says, "Christ is our righteousness," that indicates what the blessed person hungers and thirsts for. He longs for Christ!

Here's the good news. What do the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness experience? Jesus says:

#1 *Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

#2 *They will be comforted.*

#3 *They will inherit the earth.*

#4 *They will be filled.*

In other words, God blesses those who admit they don't deserve His blessings, indeed, they don't deserve *Him*. Who admits that? Not the proud, for sure. Only those who humble themselves. And only the humble will exhibit the next four beatitudes in their relationships with people:

#5 *The merciful*

#6 *The pure in heart*

#7 *The peacemakers*

#8 *Those persecuted because of righteousness*

God's kind of person *shows mercy* to others. The proud person demands perfection. The proud person looks down on the "imperfect." The blessed person shows mercy because he knows how desperately he needs mercy.

He has a *pure heart*, too. When he does a good deed, there's no hidden agenda, no ulterior motive. Pride often disguises itself. The proud hearted person will do good deeds, but he does them so you will think well of him and maybe return the favor some day.

The blessed person is a *peacemaker*. He knows that life isn't about *him* and *his personal comfort*. Consequently, he's willing to take personal risks to help bring about peaceful relationships with those at odds, something a proud person won't do.

Finally, such a person is *persecuted for righteousness*. He's died to self. He's willing to suffer abuse for doing what is right. Please realize that humility is not weakness. It's easy to be proud. A proud person thinks he's strong but in reality he is *weak*. It takes power to be humble.

What's Jesus point in the beatitudes? It's quite simple. He's making it clear that to enter His kingdom you must admit that *you lack what God requires*.

To enter God's kingdom I must admit something else, namely...

## **B. I exist for the glory of God and the good of others (5:13-16).**

Jesus gave two identity statements for His followers in this section:

*"You are the salt of the earth." (13)*

*"You are the light of the world." (14)*

What do salt and light have in common? They don't exist for themselves. Their presence brings benefit to that which they touch. Salt preserves meat, for instance. Light causes the contents of a room to be visible. Jesus

made the point of this illustration clear in verse 16...

“...Let your light shine before men *that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*”

Though Jesus certainly had more in mind with these two word pictures, here's a primary lesson. To become His disciple you must come to grips with a fundamental perspective. As His follower I exist, not for myself, but for the glory of God and the good of others. A proud person won't agree to those terms. Only the humble will.

At this point you may be thinking, “God's standard is high, higher than I can achieve!” Yes, it is. That's the very point Jesus makes next. To enter God's kingdom I must admit...

### **C. I need Christ's righteousness because mine falls short (5:17-20).**

Listen to Jesus' declaration...

Verse 17—“I have not come to abolish them [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfill them.”

Why did Jesus come to fulfill God's Law? For the simple reason that sinful human beings can't keep it, not fully. Is partial obedience a problem? Yes! Listen to Jesus again...

Verse 20—“For I tell you that *unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*”

The righteous deeds of a sinner, even a “good” sinner like a Pharisee or a religious teacher, fall short of God's standard, and those who depend on their own righteousness will never enter God's kingdom.

But that's why God sent His Son into the world. Jesus came to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. As the perfect man, He fulfilled God's law. He met God's standard. He is our hope, our only hope.

Let this sink in. My righteousness and your righteousness fall short of God's standard. We miss the mark. We're not even close. We are *helpless sinners*.

Why do we often *not* view ourselves this way? A comment by John Calvin explains:

**“It is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.” -- John Calvin[3]**

That's our problem. We compare ourselves with other people and feel pretty good about our chances. And proud, too. Only when we, as Calvin puts it, *contemplate the face of God*, will we begin to see ourselves accurately.

It's kind of like the story of the Emperor with No Clothes. He thought he looked just fine and everybody else played the game with him. But he wasn't just fine. He was *naked*. What he needed was an honest assessment of himself.

That's what we need to if we're to mortify our pride and cultivate true humility. C. J. Mahaney offers this definition:

**“Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God’s holiness and our sinfulness.” --C. J. Mahaney<sup>[4]</sup>**

That's what Jesus is helping us do in the Sermon on the Mount, *honestly assess ourselves in light of God's holiness and our sinfulness*. He makes it very clear that in order to enter God's kingdom *I need humility*. That's lesson #1. The second lesson which follows is related...

Lesson #2: As a sinner, I lack humility (5:21-7:6).

Jesus uses the bulk of the Sermon on the Mount to establish this point. As sinners, we lack humility. What we have from birth is pride and it services in a host of ways. In this section Jesus gives us five characteristics of proud people.

#### **A. Proud people settle for selective obedience (5:21-48).**

There's a key statement that appears six times in verses 21-48. It's a contrast:

“You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...”

By using that contrast Jesus exposes one of the follies of proud people. They don't disobey ALL of God's commands. They exhibit a *selective obedience*. In other words, they have just enough obedience to be dangerous.

Six times Jesus says, “You have heard that such and such a sin is wrong [typically some very blatant, external infraction], but I say to you that something else is wrong, indeed, is far worse.” I won't take time to develop Jesus' examples, merely to list them.

*You have heard that this is said...*

*“Do not murder (21).”*

*“Do not commit adultery (27).”*

*“If you divorce make sure you give a certificate (31).”*

*“Do not break your oaths (33).”*

*“Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth (38).”*

*“Love your neighbor and hate your enemy (43).”*

What do you notice about that list? It hits the “big sins.” It covers the visible sins, the externals, and quite frankly, it’s pretty keepable, at least in the eyes of a proud person.

Now watch the contrast Jesus makes to these six common statements...

## **But I say to you...**

*“If you’re angry with your brother, you’re guilty, and if your brother is upset with you, go make things right.”*

*“If you’ve lusted after a woman, you’ve committed adultery in your heart, and if you struggle with lust, take drastic action to deny yourself.”*

*“If you have marriage trouble, humble yourself and work things out.”*

*“If you say something, mean it, and do what you say every time.”*

*“If you are wronged by someone, take it. Don’t retaliate.”*

*“If you have enemies, love them and pray for them.”*

What do those six responses have in common? This. To do them, you must exhibit *humility*. To go ask forgiveness of a brother you’ve offended takes humility. To face the fact that you’re struggling with lust takes humility. To work at your marriage instead of running from it takes humility. To mean what you say all the time, when it’s easier to fudge the truth to make yourself look good, takes humility. To be hurt by someone and to choose NOT to retaliate takes humility. To love your enemy, that of course takes a ton of humility.

Beloved, we are so prone to settle for externals and think we’re okay with God. But Jesus makes it clear that selective obedience misses the mark.

## **B. Proud people use religion to impress other people (6:1-18).**

That’s the topic Jesus addresses through a series of warnings in verses 1-18. Proud people can be very religious people. Jesus identifies some of the religious things they do:

*Alms-giving* ('acts of righteousness')—verses 1-4

*Prayer*—verses 5-14

*Fasting*—verses 16-18

It's easy to think God is pleased just because we are doing "religious" activities. But He's interested in the *why* question. What's our motive? Listen to Jesus:

6:1 "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, *to be seen by them*. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."

It repulses God when we do good things for self-promoting reasons. Calvin's insight explains:

"God cannot bear with seeing his glory appropriated by the creature in even the smallest degree, so intolerable to him is the sacrilegious arrogance of those who, by praising themselves, obscure his glory as far as they can." --John Calvin<sup>[5]</sup>

What else do the proud do?

### **C. Proud people hoard their possessions (6:19-24).**

Hear Jesus:

6:19-20 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven..."

6:24 "You cannot serve both God and money."

Proud folks are self-focused. Consequently, they cling to what they have, and since it's never enough they long to have more. Jesus confronted a related tendency in the next section...

### **D. Proud people worry about material things (6:25-34).**

6:25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.”

That’s what proud people do. They *worry* about stuff. They have such a small view of God that they think He can’t or will forget to supply their needs. What’s the solution for the worrier?

6:33 “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Friends, a worrier probably doesn’t see himself as a proud person, but he is. He’s obsessed with his needs. It’s no wonder that Jonathan Edwards called pride:

“the worst viper that is in the heart” and “the greatest disturber of the soul’s peace and sweet communion with Christ” and “the most hidden, secret and deceitful of all lusts.” --Jonathan Edwards[\[6\]](#)

We seldom talk about our struggle with pride, but Edwards did. He confessed that he constantly battled his own pride, sharing this:

“What a foolish, silly, miserable, blind, deceived poor worm am I, when pride works.” --Jonathan Edwards[\[7\]](#)

Mahaney makes this observation concerning Edwards, “In his sermons and in his vast writings he constantly warned against pride, especially spiritual pride, which he viewed as the greatest cause of the premature ending of the Great Awakening, the revival that had brought so much spiritual vitality to the church in Edwards’s day.”[\[8\]](#)

### **E. Proud people judge the sins of others and excuse their own (7:1-6).**

Jesus asked a probing question at the beginning of chapter 7...

7:3 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

But that’s what the proud do. It’s why I am quick to bring to my wife’s attention the things she does that bug me, but

downplay my own faults. It's why when I feel tension in the air with a brother in Christ my first response is to assume that HE is the cause of the problem, not me.

Now it's time for a question. How do you feel at this point in Jesus' sermon? If you've taken to heart His words, probably pretty low. Jesus has built the case that in order to enter God's kingdom, I need humility. But as a sinner I lack the very humility God requires, and my pride shows its ugly head in countless ways over and over again.

Is there hope? Yes! And at this point, when we're at our lowest, Jesus tells us what that hope is.

7:7-8 “**Ask** and it will be given to you; **seek** and you will find; **knock** and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Jesus is giving us a command, a command that is so unassuming that we often miss it, yet it's the punch-line of His sermon. Having shown us our deficiency, here's the solution He offers. *Just ask.*

“That's it?” you say. “All I have to do is ask?” Yes. That's it. You can experience the wonder of God's kingdom life if you'll simply do this. *Ask.* Ask the Living God to do for you for you cannot do for yourself, and you will receive from Him exactly what you need. That's Jesus' promise.

“But are you sure He will help me?” you respond. “I know He has what I need, but will He help me?” Listen to Jesus' again:

7:11 “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who **ask him!**”

Which brings us to our third lesson about humility.

Lesson #3: If I am humble I will live in desperate dependence upon God (7:7-27).

It's not that I merely need a *little* assistance. By this point in Jesus' sermon it's obvious I am in huge trouble. I *cannot* live the kingdom life. On my own I'll miss the mark every time. But here's the good news...

#### **A. What I lack, God freely offers (7-12).**

That's why He sent His Son. That's why His Son went to the cross, died, and rose again, to *save helpless sinners* like you and me. God's salvation is a free gift extended to us in the person of His Son. But here's the qualifier...

#### **B. What God offers, I must receive by asking, seeking, and knocking.**

To be saved, I must ask God to save me. To live as a saved person ought, I must ask God every day, every moment to help me. And that's what humility is. And at the core, humility is *living in desperate dependence upon God*.

At the beginning I shared an illustration about a church that held humility as a core value. What's the difference between a church where there's pride and one where its people exhibit humility? The difference shows up in big and small ways every day. Here are some examples:

Pride says: "Well! Why wasn't I asked to be on that committee?!"

Humility says: "I'm thankful to be in a church where there are so many gifted and willing servants. I'll serve somewhere else."

Pride says: "Why didn't someone visit ME when I was sick?"

Humility says: "The Body must be helping others in need right now. That's why they didn't come. Or maybe my brothers just didn't know I needed some encouragement."

Pride says: "I saw someone yawning during my Sunday School lesson! How rude!"

Humility says: "I wonder if my brother isn't feeling well today. It's not like him to not pay attention to the teaching of God's Word." Or, "I'm not sure I was as prepared as I should have been to teach today's lesson."

Pride says: "You mean the church isn't displaying that picture I donated? Well, I'm offended."

Humility says: "I'm so grateful the Lord used that picture I gave twenty years ago to encourage His people all these years. I'm also glad to know other people are using their creative abilities to promote His excellence."

Now it's time for the question, *how?* In practical terms, how can we humble ourselves?

### Practical Steps in the Pursuit of Humility:

(adapted from Pastor C.J. Mahaney, [www.sovereigngraceministries.org](http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org))

Last time we identified three steps. For review, here they are again.

#### **A. Study the attributes of God.** Job 38:1-7; Ps. 50:21; 1 Tim. 1:17

A sure way to pop an inflated view of self is to get to know God better.

**B. Meditate on the cross every day.** Gal. 6:14; Heb. 12:2-3

John Stott explains why this is vital:

“Every time we look at the cross Christ seems to be saying to us, ‘I am here because of you. It is your sin I am bearing, your curse I am suffering, your debt I am paying, your death I am dying.’ Nothing in history or in the universe cuts us down to size like the cross. All of us have inflated views of ourselves, especially in self-righteousness, until we have visited a place called Calvary . It is there, at the foot of the cross, that we shrink to our true size.” --John Stott[\[9\]](#)

**C. Learn to laugh at yourself (others do!).**

Here are some new suggestions...

**D. Study and apply the doctrine of sin to your own life.**

Read Romans chapters 1, 2, and 3. Read a book like *The Enemy Within* by Kris Lungaard – which is a modern synopsis of the Puritan John Owen’s Vol. 6 on temptation and mortification of sin.

Many of us don’t really understand *how sin works*. Mike Renehan explains:

“Men do not like to admit their faults, nor confess they are sinners. I am guilty on both counts. But the sooner we admit and confess, the quicker we can deal with our pride. The taxonomy of the problem looks like this. Premise: All men are sinners. Upon further examination we find that sinners fall into two distinct classes, those who admit their sin, and those who don’t. Those who admit themselves to be sinners fall into two more classes, those who do something about it, and those who do not. It is only those who deal with their soul’s true dire need before God who may make progress out of their sin.”  
**Mike Renehan**[\[10\]](#)

In our study of sin we’ll discover a couple of things:

1. *There are two kinds of sinners: those who admit their sin, and those who don’t.*

The person who won’t admit their sin is in trouble. That’s obvious. But the person who does admit his sinfulness may also be in danger. Why?

2. Those who admit their sin fall into two more categories: those who do something about it, and those who do not.

**1 Cor. 10:12** “Take heed those of you who think you stand, lest you fall.”

**Numbers 32:23** “... be sure your sin will find you out.”

Brothers and sisters, it's not enough merely to agree that we are sinners. We must confess our sin, to God and all appropriate others. And we would do well to remember this warning by Pastor Brad Bigne:

“If you won't confess your sin to the appropriate individuals - in His time and not yours - He will make it VERY PUBLIC – because He opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.” --Brad Bigne

### **E. Consistently practice the spiritual disciplines.**

When I carve out prime time in the morning for Bible reading and prayer and Scripture memory, I am making a statement. I am saying to God, “I need You. I cannot face this day without You.” I am also taking a step to mortify my proud flesh.

On the other hand, when I don't begin my day in the Word and prayer I am making another statement, one that says, “I can make it today on my own. I don't need to hear your voice this morning, God. And I don't need to ask You for anything. Maybe tomorrow. We'll see.”

But even spiritual disciplines can produce pride, so C.J. Mahaney offers this suggestion. At the end of your time close your Bible and say:

“God, what I just did make absolutely no contribution to the basis of my justification, but what I just did is a statement of my need for you and dependence on You.” --**C. J. Mahaney**

### **F. Invite and pursue correction. Prov. 15:31-32**

Are you open to correction from others? Do you seek it? If there was something God wanted to tell you through your spouse, could He? Would those who know you best say you are approachable and teachable?

Proverbs 15:31-32 “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.”

### **G. Recognize your relative unimportance and prepare to be replaced.**

No one is indispensable, *no one*.

“When I claim to be the author of what is purely a gift, I commit cosmic plagiarism.” --**C. J. Mahaney**

“Graveyards are filled with indispensable men.” --**Charles DeGaul**

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[2] C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness*, pp. 22-23.

[3] John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, vol. 1, p. 38.

[4] C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness*, p. 22.

[5] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, n.p. (in Mahaney, p. 33).

[6] Jonathan Edwards, *Advice to Young Converts* (in Mahaney, p. 34).

[7] From the March 2, 1723 entry in Edwards' diary, *Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards*

[8] C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness*, p. 34.

[9] John Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, p. 179.

[10] Taken from “Tabletalk” magazine