

I invite you to open your Bibles to this morning's scripture text, which can be found in the book of Philippians, chapter 2:6-11. This can be found on page 850 in your pew Bibles.

Our Fathers Word

(Phil. 2:6–11)

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Word of God for the people of God

This week we will explore the surprising connection between God's grace and humility, along with the great enemy of God's grace, human pride. I hope you are ready for *a lot* of encouragement from scripture today!

Where do we get our ideas about humility? If God gives grace to the humble, how can I eagerly pursue *his best for me* without falling into self-interest? Both Peter and James quoted the Old Testament, "**God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.**" They latched on to this teaching from Proverbs 3:34. It must be important. First, it tells us that God *gives* grace. Fair enough. Isn't that what God is supposed to do? But this verse also tells us that God gives grace to certain kinds of people—humble people. Finally, it also tells us that God can withhold grace from another kind of people—the proud. Keep in mind that Peter and James were writing to believers.

Three times scripture reminds us, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (*Three times! Prov. 3:34, James 4:6, and 1 Peter 5:5.*) This means there is a link between humility and grace. When the Father sees his children willing to take the low place in the family, he pours out a special portion of grace to strengthen us in service to one another. Humility draws the blessing and favor of God. The same one who stripped to the waist and washed the feet of his disciples will rejoice when we learn to serve one another, humbly.

On four separate occasions Jesus employs this phrase, "the one who humbles himself will be exalted." These passages are not simply repetition caused by the gospels retelling the same story. Each passage is unique (Matt. 18:4, Matt. 23:12, Luke 14:11, and Luke 18:14). Four times Jesus lays out the challenge, humble yourself, and, by grace, God will exalt you. *But how?*

Matthew 18:1–4: Lay aside dreams of greatness and embrace dreams of dependency. This is the highway of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said that, among men, there was none greater than John the Baptist, yet the person who was “least” in the Kingdom of Heaven was greater than John. Living in the kingdom requires God’s intervention every day. We cannot “make the kingdom happen,” we can only proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is breaking in, and then depend on him to invade the ordinary with his presence and power.

Matthew 23:1–12: Lay aside the thrill of recognition and find the joy of serving. If we are honest, we will recognize ourselves in the people Jesus describes; those who strive for recognition by the way they dress, or where they park, or by the titles they hold. It is thrilling to be noticed, to be selected from among the crowd for recognition. Meanwhile, the servants come and go in the midst of all the clamor, quietly attending to the master’s business. But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reveals that the Father is the one who “sees in secret.”

Luke 14:7–14: Lay aside the thirst for honor from others and seek to honor others instead. In fact, Jesus tells us to honor those who cannot repay us. True, there is a time of reckoning and a place to receive repayment, but it is not here and now; it is later. Can we delay gratification, or does our thirst drive us to be satisfied now?

Luke 18:9–14: Lay aside self-assessment and depend on God’s mercy. Jesus draws a picture of two men at prayer. The first man begins his prayer with “thank you,” but quickly tallies up the score of the game he has been playing. He has been keeping score all along and reminds God that he is the winner.

The other man starts with God's mercy instead of self-assessment. Scorekeeping (and judgment) belong to God. Let's be careful. If we have a measuring stick, we will eventually be asked to stand next to it!

An Old Testament Example of God's Grace

Are there any limits to human wickedness? Imagine a man who practices witchcraft and séances, fortune-telling, and necromancy. Picture him engaged in human sacrifice by burning his own children on altars of fire. Give him nationwide authority and influence, so that he not only practices these things, but encourages and trains others to do the same. Now, if there is room left in your imagination, envision this man finding a way to win God's affection.

Buried deep in the Chronicles of Israel is the story of a despicable king, guilty of such things. Yet he captured the Father's grace and mercy by humbling himself before God. His name is Manasseh; you can read about him in 2 Chronicles 33. In the space of one chapter, King Manasseh was transformed from a man who provoked God to anger, to one who caught God's attention because of his humble heart. There is a lesson here for every student of Jesus. It's not that Manasseh simply experienced God's mercy; he *provoked* it.

The Father loves humility. It turns his head. Jesus tried again and again to share this secret pathway to God's heart: "**the one who humbles himself will be exalted.**" Jesus demonstrated humility as he lived in the low places of Israel's society. He portrayed children as exemplars of humble trust in the Father's care. He scorned self-sufficiency.

Humility is an expression of truth and integrity. People intuitively hunger for humility in their spiritual and political leaders. Their hearts are hungry to find the peace offered by humility. There is beauty in the humble way.

Humility is the sail that captures the grace and mercy of God. His ear is tuned to hear the weakest words of a humbled heart. In King Manasseh's story, we find hope for everyone who has wondered if they could possibly grab God's attention. Here are four sure lessons from Manasseh for those whose hearts are inclined: *(2 Chron. 33)*

(v. 10) *Even in the midst of gross iniquity, God is still speaking*: Even after a long list of rebellious acts against God, the text reveals that God was still reaching out to Manasseh. If you've been told that God hides from your sin, you've been misled. Our sin is one of the very reasons God continues to reach out to us. He loves us and refuses to give up on us. But it's not just that his love reaches down; a humble heart reaches up.

(v. 11) *God knows how to humble us*: There's a massive difference between being humbled by the Almighty and humbling yourself before him. God may arrange circumstances that bring us low in the eyes of others, but only we can lower ourselves before God. He can extend severe mercy, but we remain in control of our own thoughts and hearts.

(v. 13) *Our hearts can move God's heart*: This is an astounding revelation! God is not impressed by human power, wealth, or wisdom, but he is impressed by the human heart. When a man or woman chooses contrition, the Father tells all heaven to be quiet. Our prayers never have more power than when we take our proper place before him.

(v. 25) *Our humble example can influence the generations to come:* Manasseh had a grandson named Josiah, who, as a child, sparked a nationwide revival. I like to imagine that Josiah heard firsthand from his grandfather the *horrors of rebellion* **and** *the grace of humility*. Our life lessons can become the seed that springs up thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold in the lives of those who follow.

These are more than interesting Old Testament stories. They are postures of the heart. They are examples. Jesus embodied the life of humility before the Father. It worked out pretty well for him. He demonstrated that the humble path leads to glory, a glory unimagined by the wisdom of men.

Even more than Manasseh, Jesus modeled the way of humility. Consider Paul's magnificent description of the humble way: *(Phil. 2:6–11)*

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

What is whispered in the Old Testament is shouted in the New: humility is the doorway to God's kingdom. Humility spared Manasseh's life. It was the way of life for Jesus. It is, no less, the way for us.

Many believers are surprised to learn that there is something we can all do to bring the grace of God into our lives: we can humble ourselves. But the opposite is true. Our pride can block the grace of God. This means that among the enemies of grace, human pride hides deepest in our souls. Because God's grace meets us in our weakness, we think grace will expose us as frauds, when all the while grace flows ever stronger toward the humble in heart.

It's so easy to step across the border from truth and enter into arrogance, to label those who cannot see the truth as fools. Before we know it, we have crossed into enemy territory, even while we congratulate ourselves on being right all along. Grace understands that merely *knowing* the truth is not enough. Along with our knowledge, we need to be a grace-filled people. The problem with "*knowing it all*" is the tendency to judgment. Even a smarty like the apostle Paul recognized, "*knowledge puffs up*" (1 Cor. 8:1). Sometimes, the most insightful people appear uncaring and cold, like an oncologist who diagnoses the cancer, but misses the human being standing before him. Insight is never enough. The line between insight and judgment is drawn by grace.

Pride has a thousand faces, but always the same dreary aim, to make more of ourselves and less of God. Grace exposes our desire to sit on the throne of our own vainglorious, private kingdom. Pride is the leaven of the Pharisees. Pride is an enemy of grace. You can't give grace to people you look down upon; you can only give them pity.

Pride itself has read the Bible, so pride's solution is false humility. False humility is our attempt to fool God (even though in the end, we are only fooling ourselves). We utter modest things about ourselves that we do not believe. The problem with false humility is that it's false. False humility is the self-abasement we want others to reject, thus affirming our talent and skill. C.S. Lewis helps us guard against false humility, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself: it is not thinking of yourself at all."

Pride is always a masquerade. We enter the hall wearing a mask. We receive the praise of men, knowing all along that we look nothing like the costume we wear. Pride leads to the kind hypocrisy in which we keenly discern the flaws of others because we are haunted by our own. It makes us seem bigger than we are, and deflates those around us. Because we detest the lies we tell ourselves, we try to expose the same lies in others. We hide the very flaws he is willing to love.

The church fathers warned us, possessions lead to pride. In modern times, we pretend to joke, "He who dies with the most toys, wins." The ancients reminded us that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. In modern times, we actually believe "knowledge is power." It's not; it leads to pride. Pride leads us to pray, "I thank you that I am not like other men."

Pride cannot see beyond itself. Pride whispers that if we must accept grace, then we should have it all. Pride is a miser that hoards the grace of God. Pride hoards the grace of God, as if our sin were so great we could consume heaven's full supply of grace, when in fact our sins are common to all mankind.

Pride causes us to see grace as a zero-sum game, as if God's kindness to others means less grace for us. But grace is not of this world. It is not scarce. Grace is the stuff of the age to come.

Pride harms us deeply; grace heals us utterly. Is it any wonder that "God resists the proud?" We should be the kind of people who humble ourselves. On the other hand, if we do not humble ourselves, we may just find out that God is opposing us. (I'm not sure what that looks like, but I'm pretty sure that it's not a good thing.)

Today, I invite you to take inventory of your heart. A humble heart paves the way for a greater grace; a prideful heart does the opposite. Which one describes your heart?

LET US PRAY

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your Mercy, for your Love, and for your Grace.

Thank you Jesus for your sacrifice on the cross, for bringing salvation to the lost, to US.

We pray that you will help us to live humbly,
as you have revealed to us by your example.

In our weakness Lord, pour out your grace upon us, to mold us into your image.

Give us the strength to remove pride from our minds and hearts,
so that it will not block your grace.

Help us to think less of ourselves, and more of you Lord.

Give us the strength to persevere in life's challenges,
to do what is right, and to live in humility,
so that we will give you all the glory Father.

AMEN