

## Getting to the end of ourselves: Humbled to be Exalted

I recently read that if you ever find yourself in a situation where you've been buried alive, there is one crucial piece of advice you should know: Spit first. Dig second.

It turns out that the biggest mistake people make when they have been buried alive is trying to dig out without knowing which direction to dig. If you dig in the wrong direction you'll find yourself in a deeper hole.

When you're covered with dirt or snow it is nearly impossible to know which direction leads to the way out, **but gravity still applies**. So, you should push some dirt or snow away from your face, if possible, and spit. If the spit falls directly away from you, then you are facing down and you need to turn around. If the spit falls to the left or right, you are sideways. If the spit falls back in your face, the good news is you're facing up.

When a person spits he knows up from down. How does this relate to our spiritual lives?

When Jesus began His teaching ministry there was a lot of directional confusion. Up seemed like down. People were trying to find the light, but they only dug themselves deeper into the darkness.

For many people, what Jesus taught was perplexing and didn't appear to provide any clarity to the direction they should go. Jesus taught that the way down was up and the way up was down. For example in **Matt.5:5** He taught:

**"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."**

When we view this through our 21<sup>st</sup> century lens it seems backwards. It is the high profile people like TV and movie stars, pro athletes, wealthy business people that appear to be inheriting the earth. And among those folks, the word humble typically doesn't come to mind.

Yet Jesus invites us to think differently than the world because He wants to lead us down the path to real life, where there is true fulfillment and true blessings.

Remember this is countercultural and counterintuitive. And it is also radical, but to those who are trying to be humble it produces contentment and hope.

Jesus is teaching about an alternative to the way the world thinks about how life should be lived. The world views success by **status, power, wealth, and our relationships to others who have those things**. And the world approaches life from the perspective of every man for himself. Do whatever it takes to get yourself as close to the top as you can, and don't worry about what you do to others to get there.

One highly successful man, according to the way the world defines success, said this:

“Humility is the true key to success. Successful people lose their way at times. They often embrace and overindulge from the fruits of their success. Humility halts this arrogance and self-indulging trap. Humble people share the credit and wealth, remaining focused and hungry to continue the journey of success. (Rick Pitino)

Does anyone really believe that Rick Pitino is a humble person? His actions appear to contradict his words.

This alternative way of Jesus says that up is down. In Luke 18, Jesus teaches a parable to show us the difference between His way and the world's.

#### **Luke 18:10-14**

Jesus begins by saying “Two men went up to the temple to pray”. This sounds like how we might begin a joke, but to Jesus this is no joke. It's a story of two men. One is a Pharisee, the other a tax collector.

The Pharisees were greatly concerned about the religious compromise of the Jewish people. They were so concerned about law keeping that they created new laws to keep people from breaking the laws of God.

These new laws or traditions (Mt 15) became elevated to the same status as the law of God, so that if you broke a law of the Pharisees it was considered a violation of God's law.

People looked up to the Pharisees because they were committed to the law, educated, and influential. We would place them at the top of the social ladder.

The other man in the story was a **tax collector**. He would be like a modern-day IRS agent who was also part of a mafia. Not only did he collect taxes for the Roman govt, but he also collected extra taxes to line his own pockets. He was basically a legalized thief that we would place on the bottom of the social ladder.

So, of these two guys who walked up to the temple, one is the kind you point out to your son and say, "See this man? That's what you should be when you grow up." And the other is the kind you point out to your son and say, "Don't be like that guy."

Notice who Jesus was speaking to on this occasion –**Vs.9**

Do you think of words like smug and condescending? When you hear a similar story today do you ever think it is describing yourself? None of us thinks it's about us. We always think of someone else who fits this description?

Many years ago I preached a sermon on the duty of wives in marriage. After services an older man came up to me and said, "That was a good lesson. I was telling the old lady about that the other night."

-he didn't know that I was preaching about husbands that night!

I suppose it is human nature for us to be blind to our own faults and needs. When you hear a point that tends to step on toes, do you think "I hope he/she takes that to heart" because they really need to make some changes in their lives. Instead of examining ourselves we assume the lesson is for someone else to hear.

**Country singer, Kenny Rogers, sings a song called "I am the greatest"**. It is about a little boy playing baseball by himself. He stands in the field with his ball and bat and says I am the greatest player of them all. He puts his bat on his shoulder and tosses up the ball. And the ball goes up and the ball comes down. He swings his bat all the way around but the ball falls to the ground. The little boy doesn't say a word. Picks up his ball, he is undeterred. He says I am the greatest there has ever been. And he grits his teeth and he tries again. The ball goes up and the ball comes down and he swings his bat all the way around. The baseball falls to the

ground. He makes no excuses, he shows no fears. He just closes his eyes and listens to the cheers. He picks up his ball, stares at his bat and says I am the greatest, the game is on the line. And he gives his all one last time. And the ball goes up like the moon so bright, swings his bat with all his might...and the baseball falls to the ground and that's strike three. Now it's supper time and his mama calls, so the little boy starts home with his bat and ball, says I am the greatest that is a fact, but even I didn't know I could pitch like that. He says I am the greatest that is understood, but even I didn't know I could pitch that good!

This is a humorous story that makes us laugh, but we don't want to be like this little boy. It's one thing to be undeterred and not let failure break us.

C.S. Lewis said: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less."

But it is altogether different when we are too arrogant to see our own faults and needs.

-arrogance keeps us from getting to the end of ourselves, which prevents us from the abundant life Jesus wants us to have

Getting back to the parable, Jesus says two men went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prays boastfully about himself declaring his righteousness to God.

Did you notice that his prayer begins with a "thank you" –Vs.11

It seems like a good way to start a prayer is to thank God for His blessings. But the Pharisee identifies himself as the blessing. And to make himself look better he mentions the vile sinners around him –the extortioners, unjust, adulterers, and the tax collector.

We know that Pharisees were legalistic rule followers, who often held others to a higher standard than themselves. They were focused on performance and how they appeared to others. In Matt 23:5, Jesus says "all their works they do to be seen by men". He called them hypocrites.

One writer I read said “People loved and admired the Pharisees, so the Pharisees loved and admired themselves. They bought their own hype and missed the greatest miracle in human history”.

Consider that the Messiah stood before them and they didn’t recognize Him. They were surrounded by people with physical and spiritual needs, **but the things they cared about didn’t intersect with the things God cares about.**

-this problem is alive and well today!

-we must be extremely careful in our lives that we don’t become like the Pharisees and overlook the mission of God in our lives

We need to learn from their failure by recognizing the danger of focusing on appearances. This is difficult because it is human nature to be concerned about what others think of you. But when we are too concerned about what others think of us, then our faith tends to become more about what we do that others can see, instead of about the heart behind our actions.

**One might ask, “How do we know if our heart is right and that our actions are based on humility?”**

One person suggests using the **analogy of comparisons**. He asked, “Who do you measure yourself against? If you’re interested in becoming a better person or better at your job...you look for someone who inspires you, someone who could teach you a thing or two”. He called this **“comparing up”** and said, “if you had a pride thing, that wouldn’t happen”. He goes on to make the point that you would compare, “but you would compare yourself to people who made you feel better about yourself”. He calls this **“comparing down”**.

The Pharisee in Luke 18 compares down because he wants God to see him in the best possible light. He doesn’t look to other spiritual leaders or the OT prophets, he compares himself to the worst of society.

Comparing ourselves to others when we compare down is a trap of the devil that causes us to have a false view of ourselves. We become performance oriented and measure our faithfulness on how we compare with others.

-we can always find someone we feel is worse or lower than ourselves

Many of us who were raised in the CofC were taught this kind of religion.

- Let's keep ourselves pure and be morally upright
- And whatever you do, don't associate with sinners

So, what do we do but compare ourselves with "sinners" –folks who aren't as good as we are. Then we conclude that we're doing alright!

Five times in the parable the Pharisee uses the first-person pronoun I.

- I thank you that I am not like other men
- I fast twice a week
- I give tithes of all that I possess

We would say this guy is full of himself. Consider, for example, that according to **Leviticus 16:29-31** the Law of Moses commanded fasting one day per year, but the Pharisee fasts twice a week. That is more than 100 times what God commanded.

Do you think this is what God wants from us? An external religion.

Warren Wiersbe says:

"The great sin of the Pharisees was hypocrisy based on pride. Their religion was external, not internal; it was too impress people, not to please God. They bound people with heavy burdens, while Christ came to set people free. They loved titles and public recognition and exalted themselves at the expense of others."

**When we look at the prayer of the tax collector we see a much different picture.**

The Pharisee is full of himself and the tax collector is at the end of himself. He is exactly where Jesus wants us to be –**the end of ourselves!**

Don't you find it interesting that Jesus mentions the body language of both men.

-Pharisee stood & prayed **where he could be seen**

-Tax collector stands at a distance, wouldn't even look up to Heaven, and beat his breast

-he recognizes his unworthiness before God

-he isn't just going through the motions (not external)

The tax collector has come to the temple to be in the presence of God, and no one else matters right now. He stands off to himself and talks with God with the understanding of who he is and who God is.

Madeleine L'Engle said:

“Humility is throwing oneself away in complete concentration on something or someone else.”

The tax collector is broken, humbled by the majesty of God, and all he can do is plead for mercy and grace as he confesses his sin. **He shows us what getting to the end of ourselves looks like!**

At the end of the parable, Jesus explains that the way up is down and the way down is up.

**Vs.14**

“for everyone who exalts himself will be abased; and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The last observation I want to make from this text is that Jesus says we must humble **ourselves**.

Being humbled is something we often think of as a **passive activity**. What I mean by that is somebody or something humbles us.

- humbled by unemployment
- humbled by a failed relationship
- humbled by consequences of bad choices

**But Jesus speaks of a humbling that is active –we are the humblers.**

This isn't something we wait for, but we proactively seek it.

Why? Because this is the answer for the pride problem.

**Phil.2:6-8** Jesus shows us by His own example

- He made Himself nothing
- He was equal with God, yet He didn't cling to that status.

This seems to create a new paradox. How can we humble ourselves without becoming proud of our humility?

Two brief suggestions and the lesson is finished

To humble ourselves, we must **voluntarily confess our sin**.

-If I confess b/c I got caught, I'm humbled –but I'm not humbling myself

-If I confess b/c I'm confronted, I'm humbled –but I'm not humbling myself

Voluntary confession is a way of humbling myself, and God exalts those who do so. ~~Personally, I have always been in favor of seeing a person walk down the aisle to repent and speak for themselves, instead of writing a note or letter and having someone read it before the church.~~

~~I'm not saying it's wrong not to speak for oneself. I'm suggesting that putting yourself through the painful experience of "going forward" to confess sin & speaking for yourself might have a more profound effect on your future allegiance to God.~~

The second suggestion about how to humble ourselves without becoming proud of our humility is to:

**Treat others better than ourselves**

This is a stark contrast to the "me first" way of the world that teaches us to be self-reliant and look out for ourselves first.

**Phil.2:3** "...in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself."

Again, this is about getting to the end of ourselves. If I want to humble myself, I find someone most people would expect to serve me, **and I serve them**.

In conclusion, Jesus said the way up is down.

"blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Mt.5:5

Everywhere you look, every situation you're in, is an opportunity to humble yourself; and an opportunity to exalt Christ & His crucifixion for our redemption.