



Matthew 20:20-28
Believe
Humble

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This last Monday evening I was here at the church playing basketball with several guys, as I often do. On this night, we were a little smaller group than usual – only 5 of us. In fact, the first two games were 2 on 2, which my partner and I won both games. Then a 5th guy showed up and we added him to the other team since they'd lost both games. Still, Scot and I won 15-10, even though we were not only out-manned, but two of the three shortest players on the court. Typically, we have a rule that once a team wins 3 games in a row, we break that team up, though in the end it's really up to the losing team if they want to mix teams up or try again. But we usually we change up the teams. The point is, though: for a team to get 4 straight wins is pretty unusual. This time because the losing team wanted to keep the teams, undoubtedly wanting redemption for losing to a short-handed team. My immediate response that I said to them was, "Sounds good to me. Not many teams get to win 4 in a row out here, and that will be fun!"

Your pastor, clearly, is full of humility, right? Needless to say, the next game was not even close as Scot and I lost 15-5 or something like that. The opposing team quoted Proverbs 16:8 more than once in the game, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." But it's all part of my discipleship plan as pastor: using my lack of humility to get guys to quote Scripture while playing Basketball. ☺ Now, the reality is, it's all fun and games, and I made that comment as a humorous thing, and I don't believe it's genuinely reflective of who I am. But, the Lord has a good sense of humor too, because the next morning when I looked at the sermon schedule, I realized I was preaching a sermon today on humility and being humble.

Humility is a quality we desire, but not always for ourselves. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. put it well, "**Humility is the first of the virtues - for other people**" (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.). It just isn't a virtue that's really valued. But in the Kingdom of God, in His viewpoint, it is highly valued. And hopefully we seek to live into it in our own lives.

Today we wrap up the Believe Sermon series that we've been in for 30 of the

past 35 weeks or so. Next week we'll begin a new series on the Minor Prophets that will take us through the end of summer. But today's statement of belief is, **"I choose to esteem others above myself."** In case "esteem" throws us for a bit of a loop because it's not a commonly used word and isn't usually used as a verb like it is here, we could re-word this to say, "I choose to value/appreciate/cherish others above myself."

Now there are two dangers in this. I think we're all pretty aware of one of them that we all try and avoid, and that is when someone says or implies that they are better than others. Arrogance is a turn-off to most people. Now, Jesus made some bold statements about himself – I am the true vine, I am the gate, I am the way, the truth, and the life... and so forth. And he does elevate himself – but always for the betterment and benefit of others. He never said anything close to "I am the greatest." Or "I am the best." Or "Look at how awesome I am." So we also tend to avoid boasting.

I think the more hidden danger, and the one probably many Jesus followers are perhaps more likely to stumble into, lies at the other end of the spectrum. There is a temptation for us to say or think we are worthless, or have a false humility about our accomplishments and talents. Neither of those extremes are what the Bible calls true humility. So what does the Bible have to say about this?

Let's start with God's perspective on it. And the overriding theme we see throughout Scripture is that **God values humility**. We see it in many places, and you can't read Scripture and come away with any other conclusion. For instance, to pick on one verse, Proverbs 3:34 says, "God mocks the mockers, but gives grace to the humble." This verse is so full of wisdom and truth that it gets quoted not once, but twice by New Testament authors – in James and in 1 Peter. Clearly, God values humility, and values people who live with humility.

Jesus shows us the heart of God in regards to this, as he teaches on humility a number of times. One of them is in today's passage where the mother of the sons of Zebedee comes to Jesus, along with the two sons, and asks a favor. Their first names aren't given here, but elsewhere they are: James and John.

And what we see here is that their mom is the first helicopter parent recorded in the New Testament. She swoops in (maybe asked by them, we don't know) and accompanies her sons, who are grown and out of the house...they are on their own, and being disciplined by Jesus...and she swoops in to join them in making this request. This is like your mom showing up at college and going with you to ask your professor to grant you the position of Teacher's Assistant – but on a lot bigger scale. It's totally out of line. We parents need to walk that fine line between “parenting” and controlling/micro-managing our kids. “Helicopter parent” is a term that got coined in 1990, and yet Exhibit A is from 2,000 years ago in our Scripture passage.

Anyway, all three of them approach Jesus, and they fall down on their knees before Him. There's this posture of reverence/respect and humility, but in the end it comes across as pretty fake given the selfish request that they're making. It's not really about the lordship of Jesus and His will being carried out, but about lifting her sons up to positions of power and prominence. There really is a lack of humility in their actions and request. **And we have to be careful that we come before Jesus for the right reasons and right motives, as well.** We want to make sure that our pride is laid aside; in fact not just laid aside, but that we confess our pride and other sin, so we would bow down to Jesus in humility so that he would truly be Savior *and Lord* of our lives. In the words of our statement today, we want to “esteem Jesus” above ourselves. We want to value Jesus above ourselves. We want His will to be done, not ours. That's not the impression given here about their request.

Jesus then addresses James and John and talks about the difficulty of being His disciple, and they say they're up to the task. Jesus affirms them for that, but then makes it clear that sitting at his right or left hand is for those whom His Heavenly Father has prepared for those places. The implication is that it's not these two, though that isn't definitively stated.

Then we see the fruit of their lack of humility, as the other ten disciples are “indignant” toward James and John. They're ticked off and annoyed that they would try and insert themselves into a position of power. Pride always brings about discord and jealousy – this is true in a work environment, in a marriage, between siblings, in a church, or in any other

group setting where people are working together in some capacity. Elevating ourselves above others brings division. Pride divides.

Instead, Jesus lifts up those who have the humility to serve as the kind of people Jesus is shaping his disciples to be. Unlike the rulers of the Gentiles who lord it over their people, Jesus says “Not so with you.” In other words, don’t be worldly in your views on this, or in how you live it out. The way the world operates isn’t how the Kingdom of God operates. And then he says, **“Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28).**

This is how things work in the Kingdom of God. If you want to become great, then have some genuine humility...set aside your desire to be great...and serve others. Lay your pride aside and use the gifts God has given you to serve others and encourage them or build them up in faith. Esteem others as better than yourself. Don’t tell people how great you are at something; let others say that. Just work at serving others, and doing what you can to help the team.

Now, positions of service can all look different. A pastor who stands in front of the congregation and preaches a sermon or a worship leader who leads the congregation in singing are – hopefully – doing so with a servant’s heart: to help people in their understanding and application of God’s word through the sermon, and to aid us all in singing our praises to God through music. We serve the congregation, even though they’re visible, up-front, leadership kinds of roles. But the heart and the motivation for doing those is no different than the person who prepares a church newsletter to be mailed, or decorates the church for Vacation Bible School, or serves as a mentor in the youth confirmation process, or prays with a person in their time of pain or loss. They are all forms of service, and are an expression of humility, as we esteem others in the name of Jesus.

What Jesus teaches us, however, is that for the person who has that humility, and serves with a pure heart, there is a paradox at work. A

paradox, as you probably know, is a person or place or thing, or a statement about a person, place, or thing, that seems contrary to logic or common sense and yet is actually true. For instance, if you were to say to some of my friends from college who haven't kept in touch with me, "Brian North is a pastor" they'd say that is a paradox – it's contrary to common sense, but it's true. There are other paradoxes we can state: "Seattle has a Major League Baseball Team." I know, it's hard to believe, but it really is true. "Seattle has sunny days." Unless you live here, you wouldn't necessarily know that because the rest of the country thinks it rains all the time. "Disneyland is worth the cost." We've been once with our kids, several years ago... and when you buy the tickets, it's SO expensive. But at the end of the day, you're so glad you did it. It's a great experience.

Similarly, there is a paradox with humility. Jesus states it in verse 26: **"Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant [paradox], and whoever wants to be first must be your slave [another paradox]" (Matthew 20:26-27).** Jesus says similar things elsewhere, like in the Sermon on the Mount, with the Beatitudes, particularly when Jesus says: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5-6). So in God's economy, these things work backwards compared to how most of the world operates - though there are plenty of examples throughout history to encourage us as we live with humility.

For instance, Jesus himself is a great example of this paradox. His name is arguably the most recognized name in the world. He says in today's passage, where he gives himself as an example of humility for us, **"Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).** So he let his humility lead him all the way to the tragedy of the cross, and yet then he is lifted up in victory in His resurrection (a paradox). There are others, of course, as well. In his book, "Humility: An Unlikely Biography of America's Greatest Virtue" author David J. Bobb looks at several American leaders who exhibited this paradox of humility and greatness, including Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Abigail Adams, and Frederick Douglass.

One final aspect of humility and being humble: **Humility asks us to**

acknowledge our imperfections. It requires that we admit when we are wrong and then change course.¹ I think that gets to the heart of why humility is tough: we love to point out how everyone else is wrong, but admitting our *own* imperfections and admitting *we're* wrong and need to change course is tough to do. Our pride gets in the way and we think it shows weakness to make this kind of admission. But the reality is that a strong person is one who can acknowledge when a new course is needed.

And this is where humility is so key to being a disciple of Jesus, because in essence, this is what allows us to acknowledge that our ways are wrong, and that Jesus' ways are right. **Humility is what allows us not just to acknowledge imperfections and admit we're wrong, but to confess our sin and change course (repent) so we'd get back to following Jesus.** It's hard to acknowledge that our way of doing things isn't working, and yet it's exactly what is needed in our journey of discipleship with Jesus. And when we have the humility to confess that we are wrong – that our attitude was wrong or our words were wrong or our decision was wrong – when we can confess that to God as well as to our spouse, or our co-workers, or our neighbors, or our brother or sister in Christ...when we can live into that humility and confess it, we don't show weakness at all. We show strength, but it's a strength that draws us together and creates unity, and draws us closer to Jesus. It strengthens us as His disciples.

Remember, the disciples had the exact opposite problem when pride drew James and John and their mom to ask for positions of power. The other 10 became indignant. **Imagine if they had gone to Jesus and instead said, "We need to confess that we've been lusting after positions of power in your Kingdom. We want to turn away from that, and we ask if you would help us to serve the other Disciples?"** Can you imagine the positive impact that would have had? For those of you who are married: If you don't already to this, can you imagine how much more unity you'd have in your marriage if you each had the humility to confess stuff – much of which is probably obvious to your spouse, anyway: that you've been working too much, been on social media too much, that your temper has been short...even confessing that you don't always recognize when you've hurt your spouse and ask them to gently open your eyes? And this goes for our other

relationships, too, as I mentioned a couple minutes ago.

So: where is some humility needed in your life? Where do you need to esteem someone else above yourself? Or where do you need the humility to confess an imperfection or a wrong or some kind of sin, and then change course? Probably, humility is needed somewhere.

Let's wrap up today's message and our Believe series with a story: The famous missionary Hudson Taylor was scheduled to speak at a large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia. (If you don't know who Hudson Taylor is, many consider him to be the most influential missionary since the Apostle Paul, spending 51 years in China as a missionary.) The worship leader introduced the missionary in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as "our illustrious guest." Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message by saying, "Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master." What a great picture of true humility that esteems Jesus above ourselves. I pray that you and I would live with that kind of humility, serving Jesus, so that we would be drawn closer to, and so that others would be drawn closer to, our illustrious Master.

Would you join with me in our 30th, and final, statement of belief from this series? **"I choose to esteem others above myself."** By the grace of God, may it be so for each of us for the building up of our own faith in Jesus, and so that the people around us whom God puts us in contact with would also Believe. Let us pray...Amen.

ⁱ Not my wording! I came across it at this article/book review:

<https://www.fastcompany.com/3018516/benjamin-franklin-george-washington-and-the-power-of-humility-in-leadership>