



What the Humble Are Proud Of

SERIES: *Wisdom for Back to School / Outdoor Service*

Chan Gailey, football coach for the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets, told how he learned a lesson in humility. Gailey was then head coach of Alabama's Troy State who was playing for a National Championship. The week before the big game, he was headed to the practice field when a secretary called him back to take a phone call. Gailey told her to take a message. She responded, "But it's *Sports Illustrated*." "I'll be right there," he said. As he made his way to the building, he began to think about the upcoming article. It would be great publicity for a small school like Troy State to be in SI. As he got closer, he felt a three-page article wouldn't be enough to tell the whole story. Coming even closer to his office, he started thinking he might be on the cover. "Should I pose or go with an action shot?" he wondered. His head was spinning with all of the possibilities. When he picked up the phone and said hello, the person asked, "Is this Chan Gailey?" "Yes, it is," he replied. "This is Sports Illustrated, and we're calling to let you know that your subscription is running out. Do you want to renew?" Coach Gailey concluded the story by saying, "You're either humble or you'll be humbled."

The lesson Coach Gailey learned that day calls to mind something that shows up in the Bible over and over again. As a matter of fact, in the Old Testament book of Proverbs this is a repeated theme. These Proverbs were collected by King Solomon who was considered the wisest man in the world at the time. Listen to what Solomon says:

"When pride comes, then comes dishonor, But with the humble is wisdom" (11:2).

"Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before stumbling" (16:18).

"Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor" (18:12).

"A man's pride will bring him low, But a humble spirit will obtain honor" (29:23).

When Solomon says pride comes before destruction, and humility comes before honor, I'm not sure we really believe him. MTV did a documentary called, "The Seven

Deadly Sins." Because one of those seven sins is pride, you might wonder what the documentary had to say. It turned out to be a montage of celebrity quotes, interviews and one-liners. Queen Latifah was asked about the sin of pride. "Pride is a sin?" she responded. "I wasn't aware of that." Actress Kirstie Alley added, "I don't think pride is a sin...I think somebody made that up." Rapper Ice-T echoed the same idea: "Pride is mandatory," he declared. "That's one of the problems of the inner city. Kids don't have enough pride." It seems that one of the basic teachings of scripture is totally out of touch with the values of our modern culture. In our pride, we say, "God helps those who help themselves." But the Bible says, "God helps those who humble themselves."

Recently I was officiating at a funeral and it was time for the soloist to sing. She chose to sing Amazing Grace. She began, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound..." She was singing beautifully but when she got to the next line she changed the words. Instead of saying "that saved a wretch like me" she said "that saved a soul like me." Nobody seemed to notice or care. Why did she change it? Why do so many people choke over that line? It's our pride that says, "I'm not a wretch. I may have made a few mistakes. After all, nobody's perfect. But don't call me a wretch. That's going too far."

Our culture says, "The people who succeed are confident, independent, and think well of themselves." So when the Bible says over and over again that pride comes before destruction we don't really believe it.

I. Wrong ideas about pride and humility.

Part of the problem is we misunderstand what Solomon meant. When the Bible talks about humility it isn't talking about hating yourself or beating yourself up. You can be humble and still have a healthy sense of self esteem. God created human beings in his image. We all reflect something of the glory of our Creator. That says something about our worth and our value.

Being humble doesn't mean to deny the fact you have certain abilities. It's not an act of pride to acknowledge your own gifts and strengths. It may be good to be modest, but that's not what we're talking about here. We're not talking about the modesty of the Gold Medalist who says, "Aw shucks, I couldn't have done it without my coaches and teammates." That may be a nice way to handle victory, but you can be modest in your words yet proud in your spirit.

Nor does he mean that we deny ourselves all rights and privileges. He's not telling us we should never stand up for ourselves or our convictions. He isn't saying the wimps of this world will be honored. He's not promoting passivity of spirit or a cowering kind of personality.

II. Will the proud really be humbled?

Not only do we misunderstand what pride and humility really are, we also misunderstand what it means that the proud will be humbled and the humble will be honored. But in certain ways, we all know it's true. It's true in the sense that sometimes the proud can get in trouble by letting their guard down. How many Olympians have we watched in the last two weeks stumble badly who were supposed to be sure gold medalists? You have to wonder if they let their guard down and underestimated their opponents. Pride can make us cocky and even lazy. We can overestimate our abilities.

A strong young man at a construction site was bragging that he could outdo anyone in a feat of strength. He made a special case of making fun of one of the older workmen. After several minutes, the older guy had had enough. He said, "Why don't you put your money where your mouth is? I'll bet a week's wages I can haul something in a wheelbarrow over to that building that you won't be able to wheel back." The young guy smiled and said, "You're on, old man." The old man reached out, grabbed the wheelbarrow by the handles and turned to the young man and said, "All right. Get in." Maybe pride does come before a fall.

Pride can also get us in trouble because, let's face it, it annoys people. No one likes to be around the arrogant. On the other hand, we respect and want to follow those who are genuinely humble. Take the best-selling book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. This has been a very influential book in the business world. The book is driven by the question: How can a good company become a great company? Collins

spent five years studying eleven corporations that made the leap from being merely good companies to being great ones. He identified two specific character qualities shared by their CEOs. The first was no surprise: These people were driven, willing to endure anything to make their company a success. But the second trait these leaders had in common wasn't expected: They were humble. They kept pointing to the contribution of others and didn't like drawing attention to themselves. When Collins interviewed people who worked for these leaders, they used words to describe them like: humble, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, understated.

So sometimes the humble end up better off. But I think if we're honest we'll also have to admit that pride doesn't always lead to destruction and humility doesn't always lead to success, at least in this life. There are a lot of proud people who die on top of the world and there are a lot of humble people who die without honor. For example, the Bible says Moses was the most humble man who ever lived, but Moses died without getting to realize his dream of seeing the Promised Land. That's the reality of the world we live in. Sometimes the proud die on top and the humble get buried. I have to believe Solomon had something else in mind when he said this.

III. Jesus teaches us that pride and humility are spiritual issues.

One of the things we have to realize is that in the Bible pride and humility have to do first with our relationship with God. This comes out forcefully in the teaching of Jesus. One day Jesus told a story about two men who went to church to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee stood before God and thanked him. He thanked God that he was not like other people. He thanked him he wasn't a liar and a cheat in business. He didn't sleep around and rip people off like the tax collector. He mentioned that he fasted on a regular basis and gave lots of money to the church. What he was saying was true; he probably lived an upright life. This is the kind of guy other people look at and think, "If only I could get it together like him. I'll bet he goes to church every Sunday and his family doesn't fight on the way there."

The tax collector couldn't have been more different. Tax collectors were the scoundrels of the day. They were Jews who bought franchises from the Roman government

which gave them the right to collect taxes from their own people. Besides being traitors to Rome, they got rich by extortion. Rome had no standardized tax rates, so the tax collector could charge what he wanted, and skim whatever he could off the top for himself. They were rich but they were also the scum of Jewish society. Today, the closest thing we have to a tax collector is a high flying pimp or drug dealer. So Jesus says when this man prayed, he didn't have a whole lot to say. You get the feeling he wasn't all that comfortable in church. He didn't even dare raise his eyes to heaven. He beat his breast and cried out, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." We say, "Well, he ought to be praying that! If anyone needs mercy, he does!"

What's going on in this story? We might say the Pharisee's problem was conceit. He really was a better man, he just needed to be more modest. But his problem wasn't conceit, it was pride. Luke said something important to introduce this story. He said, **"Jesus told this story to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and looked down on everybody else."** This tells me a couple of things:

First, the difference between pride and humility has to do with who you trust. The Pharisee didn't trust in God; he trusted in himself. He didn't really need God for anything. But the tax collector came like a beggar looking to God for help. We might say, "Well, he had an advantage. He really was a loser!" But he could have practiced his own form of pride. He could have said, "Lord, thank you I'm not like this proud Pharisee. I may be a sinner, but at least I'm open and honest about it. At least I'm not a hypocrite. I'm humble and proud of it." But he didn't say that. Instead he saw his sin and his need for mercy and he trusted God, not himself. Who do you trust?

Second, the difference between pride and humility depends on how you measure yourself. The Pharisee was proud because he measured himself manward. That's why it says, "He looked down on everyone else." He didn't measure himself by God's holiness; he found a guy who would make him look good. That's why we love to put others down; it makes us feel better about ourselves. The tax collector looked Godward and saw that by God's standards he was spiritually bankrupt. He wasn't just being modest; he saw himself as he really was in relation to God. Do you look manward or Godward?

Some of us are not humble because we really haven't

looked Godward and identified the sin in our lives as sin. We've rationalized it and trivialized it. We think of ourselves as "mistakers" but not "sinners." But every once in a while something happens that gives us a window into how sinful we really are.

My uncle and his wife never had children. As a result, he treated my mother like a daughter and my brother and I like grandsons. When he got older, his wife was in a convalescent hospital and he stayed in his home. Before he died, he shared with me that if he died first his wife would become the sole owner of their house and her plan was to leave it to some of her own relatives. But if she died first, my uncle would leave the house to my brother and I, along with four other cousins. I remember the day he called me to tell me that his wife had died. He was full of grief and remorse. My first thought was not to grieve over the loss of my aunt, but to rejoice over the fact that now I would inherit one-sixth of the house. There is a sense in which in my spirit I could have killed her for the money. That day I saw how ugly and dark my heart really is. Someone might say, "Well, that's a normal reaction. You didn't really mean it." But I was humbled because I saw myself Godward. In God's eyes, I wasn't a mistaker; I was a greedy sinner and like the tax collector all I could do was cast myself on the mercy of God.

And because God is a God of grace and mercy, he helps us. Jesus closed that story with a statement that must have sounded like nonsense. He said the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went back to his house justified, right with God. And then he gave the lesson for all of us: **"for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted"** (Luke 18:14). Sounds a lot like Solomon! In our pride, we say, "God helps those who help themselves." But Jesus and Solomon are teaching us that "God helps those who humble themselves."

II. How are the humble exalted?

You see, both Jesus and Solomon were talking about more than just earthly honor or dishonor. They were talking about being made right with God and being exalted or humbled by God for all eternity. We say "He who dies with the most toys wins." Jesus says, "What does a profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul?" In order to save your soul, you have to humble yourself and be open to the help only God can give.

Helicopter pilot Ian McConnell was involved in the rescue operation for Hurricane Katrina relief. When he flew over the scene the devastation was unbelievable. Most of New Orleans was under water. His crew got right to work, airlifting stranded people from their rooftops and out of windows and delivering them to the Superdome helipad. To their chagrin they were only able to help a few of the survivors. In an interview, McConnell shared why: "On our first three missions, we saved the lives of 89 people, three dogs, and a cat. On the fourth mission, to our great frustration, we saved no one—but not for lack of trying. The dozens we attempted to rescue refused pickup! Some people told us to simply bring them food and water. We warned them of what could happen, but they still refused. I felt frustrated and angry, since we had used up precious time and fuel, and had put ourselves at risk during each rescue attempt. I felt like they were ungrateful. But, in truth, they didn't know how desperate their situation was."

Unless we humble ourselves and see how desperate our situation is we'll never be open to the help God offers. We won't feel like we need it. The Christian faith declares that God sent his Son Jesus and didn't just put him at great risk but sent him to die for us to rescue us from our sins. Jesus said, "I came to seek and to save the lost. It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners." That means the first connection between my soul and Jesus is not my pride but my humility; not my goodness but my badness; not my standing but my falling. God will not and cannot help those who help themselves. But he does help those who humble themselves.

Father, I confess to you my own pride. Though I may have believed in you, my heart's most fundamental trust was in my own goodness and ability. That's only gotten me in trouble. As far as I know in my heart, today I humble myself and put my trust in the one and only Savior you have sent, your own dear Son, Jesus. I ask you to accept me not for anything I have done but because of what Christ has done for me. Amen.