

The first two weeks of our Do Unto Others series focused on Kindness and Compassion. When I confirmed with Pastor Pat that I could cover for her Walk to Emmaus weekend, she said that the series for the month was Do Unto others. And I, with decades of Sunday School lessons teaching the Golden Rule, thought ha! That will be a breeze of a message to write. Then, two weeks ago, I looked at the bulletin listening the topics for the series and counted down to the third week – Humility. And I groan a little, on the inside. Not because I disagree with being humble, quite the contrary! But because I have seen the effects of some of the concepts and verses of humility being used in a harmful way. So, I need a prayer before we tackle the concepts of Biblical humility and what it means for how we live our lives.

Loving Father, we ask you to send your Spirit to us here today. Open our ears and our hearts so that we hear what you want us to know. Amen.

So, first, let me share my concerns about humility teachings gone awry. I have witnessed teachings about not being prideful being presented in such a forceful and stringent manner that children end up believing that if they feel proud of themselves for something they learned or accomplished that they are being sinful. Anyone who has spent any time around children knows that they learn the most when they are self-motivated to learn. And they become self-motivated when they feel proud of themselves for their accomplishments. Let's be honest, adults who continue to be interested in learning new skills do so because of the feelings of accomplishment and, yes, pride, that they did something they were previously unable to do. Our second son, Adam, started training in martial arts when he was nine years old. One of the reasons we agreed on martial arts was because he was not a child who was very confident in his abilities. Well, six months of training changed that! He started teaching at that same school before he turned 18 and he now runs that school. A few years ago, his daughters started doing gymnastics. Adam spoke to one of the teachers and said he had always wanted to be able to do a standing back flip – many of the teachers he had early in his training seems to defy gravity! And the teacher said, no problem, I can teach you how to do that. So, past the age of 30, Adam worked through several steps with the teacher until he could do a standing back flip. Had he not learned to be proud of what he was learning in his early training years he would never have developed the self confidence that led to him being an amazing martial arts teacher. He would never have been able to run a successful martial arts school and learn to do a back flip in his 30s without that self-confidence. And that confidence comes from feeling proud about what you have already accomplished and knowing that you can do the next hard thing. Adam would not have the life he has now, would not be the person he is now without the pride and confidence that learning martial arts instilled in him.

I firmly believe that teaching people that feeling good about yourself for new skills or accomplishments can cause real damage in two ways. One issue is that people will stop feeling pride in accomplishments and,

eventually, stop trying to learn new things. Does anyone believe that God wants us to be stagnant, never improving? The second issue is that people who continue to feel proud of themselves and continue to strive for new accomplishments will feel sinful with every positive feeling about their increasing skillset. Does that sound like God? Do we believe God wants people who learn new skills to feel like they are sinning if the accomplishment makes them happy? That sound really messed up to me. Not at all like God.

I think the big disconnect is the difference between feeling proud and being prideful. To my way of seeing things, feeling proud is a temporary, situational emotion. A child is proud they learned to tie their shoes, a college graduate is proud their hard work resulted in a degree, a new driver is proud they learned to drive a clutch. Pride is tied to the learning of a new skill or a big accomplishment. Adam was proud when he accomplished that standing back flip, when asked about it, the pride of the moment returns during that conversation. Being prideful is not temporary, it is a person's state of being, a personality characteristic. It is not tied to a specific skill or accomplishment. If being able to tie your shoe, drive a stick shift and graduate college becomes part of your personality, something that makes you feel puffed up then you are prideful. If Adam walked around all day, every day, feeling proud because he can do a standing back flip, then he is being prideful. And that is where the problem happens.

I believe that God does want us to feel proud of our big accomplishments or new skills that we have learned or our willingness to try something new even if we aren't great at it yet. God wants us to develop to our fullest ability – because he gifted us with our abilities, whether we have realized all our abilities or not. Plus, and this is a big one for me, all those abilities have the potential to benefit God's children. God gave us our abilities and gifts to be used for good in his world! If we are too concerned about feeling pride in our accomplishments, we won't attempt new things, we won't become who God wants us to be. Or maybe we learn new things but we keep them hidden. We don't let anyone know what we can do so that we don't appear "too proud". Either way, we run the risk of not using the gifts that God has given us for the benefit of his people!

Sorry, that was a long lead in. I want us to all clearly understand that talking about humility, about being humble, does not mean that we cannot feel pride. It is what we do with the pride that is where we can go wrong.

I struggled to even find a definition of humility that I believe to be Biblical. Many of the definitions I found mentioned having a "low opinion of yourself". Again, can we do our best for God and his people if we believe

we are not good at anything that we do, if we have a low opinion of ourselves? The Cambridge English Dictionary almost nailed it. “the feeling or attitude that you have no special importance that makes you better than others.” Then they had to add “lack of pride”. But we can work with the main part of this definition and ignore those last three words!

So, let's tackle what Paul had to say. Or what maybe Paul had to say to maybe the church in Ephesus. Scholars are not in complete agreement that Paul was the author – though the list of Christian characteristics listed in our reading does sound a lot like Paul's fruits of the spirit in Galatians, so maybe the writer was inspired by Paul? The verses we are working with today are part of the section of Ephesians that deals with ethical factors of the Christian faith – in other words, how do we live what we believe.

Let's listen to those characteristics again: humility and gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Humility is the first characteristic on the list. I think it is first because having humility will lead us to being gentle, patient, loving and striving for peace. If we are not humble it takes much more effort to be gentle with people we see as less important than we are. It takes more effort to be patient with people not as skilled as we see ourselves. Being loving or extending peace to individuals we perceive as being less than we are may not seem to be worth our time or effort.

Going back to the Cambridge English Dictionary, if having humility means that you do not believe there is anything about you that makes you better than other people, it will lead you to be gentle and patient and loving. Of course, I am going to illustrate this point with a knitting reference. I cannot tell you how many times someone has said this sort of thing to me: I am not a real knitter, I only knit scarves. I am not a real knitter, I only knit socks. I am not a real knitter; I cannot purl or decrease. My response is always that if you use sticks to turn string into something else, you are a knitter. The fact that I personally can knit more things than you can does not diminish the fact that you are a knitter. Now, what if my approach was different? What if I have no humility about my knitting ability? Then my response might be, Yeah, you are right, you aren't a real knitter until you can purl, knit a sweater, knit lace. I would not be gentle with my comments about their knitting. I would not be patient with a knitting student that was struggling with turning the heel of a sock. I would argue that my techniques are the only correct way to do things, making no effort to being loving or peaceful with those who use different techniques. I would be reinforcing the idea that they should not be proud of what they have learned to do. I would be diminishing the value of what they have accomplished so far. I

may even have discouraged them from trying to learn more or even from doing the knitting they have been doing. My lack of humility is doing damage. The non-knitters here are starting to wonder, well what impact does that have on God's plans. What if that "I only knit scarves" knitter was knitting scarves for a homeless outreach program in their city? What if that "I only knit socks" knitter was knitting socks that were being given to school children in a low-income area? What if the "I cannot purl or decrease" knitter was using their knitting to hold onto some normality as they struggled through grief or depression? I know that when my depression gets a real hold on me, I put my knitting down. My lack of humility may have just gotten in the way of people caring for vulnerable children of God! That is where the sin is found!

When we are lacking in humility, when we believe that we are better than people – we start grouping people as "other" than us. We start looking down on those "others". Those who didn't go to college, who don't have a professional job, those whose English is accented, those whose skin is not the same as mine, those whose families look different from mine, those who don't vote the way I do. And once we decide that we are better than all the "others" it easily follows that they are wrong, they are less than, they are not as important as we are in the functioning of our community. If we are right and "they" are wrong, if our needs/wants are more important than their needs then we very quickly stop being patient, we stop being gentle, we stop acting in loving ways and we absolutely stop working for peace.

We see this happening so often right now as we head towards our national elections. I am not singling out any one party or candidate, it happens across the board of political positions. It seems that any political posts on social media, and many that didn't start out being about politics, very quickly become charged with accusations, name calling, and general nastiness. The word "they" becomes charged with anger and negative assumptions. If "they" are being discussed, there is a complete lack of humility. A lack of honoring the opinion of others, even when we cannot agree or even see value in their positions, shows a lack of humility. It shows that we are placing ourselves above those who don't agree with us. If you don't agree with me, you are wrong and therefore you are of less value than I am. Pretty harsh, right? Most people are not using those actual words but that is the message that is being sent and received. And it is the wrong message for believers of Christ to be sending. We know that we are all created by God, loved by God and put here on earth to learn to love Him and care for His people. Once we set ourselves above any of His people, we start doing damage and we start sinning. Without humility, there can be no true following Christ.

The opposite of humility is conceit, Cambridge English Dictionary defines conceit as “The state of being too proud of yourself and your actions”. Being conceited and selfish is sinful and not of the Spirit. We, individually, can do real damage when we are conceited and prideful. But it gets worse if two of us are interacting from a place of conceit. Conceit does not like seeing conceit in another. When our conceit, our lack of humility, interacts with the conceit of another, either conceit in another struggling Christian or in one who does not yet know Christ, there will be conflict and strife. Our prideful state keeps us from listening, keeps us from being patient and loving and keeps us from working for peace. It can be argued that the armed conflict around the world is based in conceit and a lack of humility. If leaders of nations believe that they are above those who live in other countries, it is easier to launch missiles and bombs. If “they” are wrong, then “they” are of less value than we are and therefore their lives and wellbeing are not valued while we are trying to achieve our goals. When conceit is present and humility is lacking, there will not be peace in our homes, our churches, our communities or our world.

But an approach of humility? Of truly believing that we are not above anyone, not more important or special than any other single person on this planet? That is the attitude that can change the world, right the wrongs and help those most in need of physical and spiritual support and comfort.

How do we cultivate humility? How do we know we need to cultivate humility? That second one might be the better question because if we do not live from a place of humility we are probably not aware that we are prideful or conceited. Our upbringing, our life experiences, the influence of those close to us through our early adult years and a multitude of other issues have all formed our world view and where we fit in it. Sometimes the very things that we were raised to be “proud” of became things that we became prideful of. Did an upbringing in a well-off community lead you to believe you were above those from the wrong side of the tracks? Did your family value education so much that you look down on those with no initials after their signatures? Were you raised in a military, patriotic family that lead you to believe that if you were an American you were better than those born in other countries? Were you raised in an environment that valued boys above girls and you maintain some sexist ideas? These become deeply ingrained beliefs that require us to do some really hard work to free ourselves from. But we must free ourselves!

Finding suggestions to help us focus on humility that did not stray into the area of making people ashamed of feeling proud of accomplishments was challenging, but I did find a list, by Annie Yorty, that really

seemed designed to lead us to a Christian humility. This is your homework, so find a pencil if you want to take them home with you – there are seven of them:

1. Compare yourself only to Jesus – this one really hit home!

From Ephesians 4:13 *This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.* We will see ourselves for who we are if we measure ourselves by Christ's standard and all pridefulness will flee

2. Choose to serve others. Jesus served all people, even “stooping” to wash feet. No job is beneath our dignity if we serve as Jesus served.

3. Don't put on a show – Jesus was critical of the religious leaders who cared more about their position, about how people saw them, than about leading people to a life focused on God.

4. Be grateful – everything we have comes from God, remembering that can keep us from becoming prideful about what we have accomplished or accumulated.

5. Vie for last position – Matthew 20:16 *So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last.* Jesus made it clear that the pecking order in heaven will be based on humility. It would be a good idea to practice putting others first now.

6. Learn to accept critical feedback – God often uses a good friend to help us stay on the right path. If our pridefulness is showing, a true friend can point it.

7. Guard your mouth. James says be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry. Pridefulness is an assertive characteristic, and it often starts talking before our brains have become engaged. Learning to wait, to listen to other points of view is one way to practice humility.

Our lack of humility can limit our ability to do God's work and limit the ability of others to do God's work. A lack of humility, a pridefulness, in those who wield great power can be catastrophic and deadly. Once we learn

to live from a place of humility all the rest of Paul's characteristics: gentleness, patience, love, and working for peace can all become a reality that will allow God's love to be spread wide and far.

I want to close with the words of a meme I saw the day I started writing this message – a God wink, if you will.

It read: Sometimes I joke about what I'd do if I knew I had one day left to live. Eat junk, go crazy, ect. Today it hit me: Jesus knew. And He washed feet. He... Washed....Feet.