

Humility Toward One Another

1 Peter 5:5

Last week Brian taught from James 4 on humbling ourselves before God. In that passage James makes the statement that “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Humility is the quality in our lives that either invites the grace of God or repels the grace of God. Humility is so foundational that God notices our humility (or the lack thereof) and treats us accordingly. For that reason John Stott made the following statement:

“At every stage of our Christian development and in every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is the greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend.”

John Stott

Today we are going to explore how this is true in our relationships in the body of Christ. In the body of Christ pride is our greatest enemy and humility is our greatest friend.

On the one hand, this is challenging to hear because it is so easy (and so common) to be prideful toward other people – especially in the church. I don’t think I’m going out on a limb in saying that you are probably prideful toward somebody else in the body of Christ (and/or in this church). You probably wouldn’t come out and say it, but the attitude you have toward that person is, “I am obviously superior to you (in my convictions, in my spiritual habits, in my knowledge). Therefore I am under no obligation to patient and kind toward you. I have no responsibility to help you in any way.” That’s what my pride looks like anyway. You know who I tend to be prideful toward? People that I think are prideful. Although it’s completely understandable, that attitude and that approach to relationships is poison in the body of Christ. Pride is our greatest enemy.

On the other hand, humility is our greatest friend. Humility isn’t some wimpy, passive approach to relationships. Humility is a strong, intentional attitude toward relationships. Humility is fueled by the conviction that every single person is created in the image of God and therefore intrinsically valuable. Therefore, I should seek that person’s best, putting his/her needs above my own – just like Jesus did. Even if I can’t stand somebody, s/he is created in the image of God and should be valued. Such humility is our greatest friend. When that attitude pervades a community of believers it’s truly amazing.

Quite simply I hope that *every single person here today* leaves with the conviction that you should show humility toward *every single other person* in the body of Christ. I hope you leave with the conviction that there are no exceptions. I’ll show you where that ambition comes from in a few minutes. Turn with me to 1 Peter 5:5.

“All of you, clothe yourselves in humility” (1 Peter 5:5) In the first 4 verses of 1 Peter 5, Peter gives instruction to the elders of the church. He appeals to them as a fellow elder to “shepherd the flock of God” with proper motives. Elders aren’t supposed to serve out of a sense of obligation (“somebody’s got to do it”), and they aren’t supposed to serve for personal benefit (whether status or financial gain). Elders are supposed to have a shepherd’s heart, genuinely wanting to see people thrive in their relationship with God. Consequently, they are exercise

oversight willingly and whole-heartedly. Elders are to lead by example, not “lording it over” others; they are to be servants, not bosses. Peter says that those who serve in that way can expect great encouragement when the “Chief Shepherd,” Jesus Christ, appears. They’ll receive His “well-done” for being good under-shepherds.

In verse 5 Peter turns his attention to the rest of the church. In the first part of the verse Paul addresses “younger men”:

5 You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders. . .

The term “younger” is somewhat relative, but the term used generally referred to people 30 years old and younger (see Davids, p. 184). Everybody in the church is supposed to welcome the elders’ oversight, but perhaps it’s especially challenging for younger men to do so. There’s a tendency to question whether those who are older have much to offer by way of insight and wisdom. When you “submit to your elders,” you welcome their oversight, believing that God has given them spiritual wisdom that needs to be heeded.

Having been a “younger man” a few years ago, I can remember being confident about many things that probably warranted more study and investigation. For example, when I was about 30 years old I went through the process of being “licensed” in the Free Church. You write a position paper on various issues of doctrine and spiritual practice. Then you defend your positions in front of a panel of pastors and other church leaders. On the section about “the Bible” I had written a strong statement about how “every believer should study the Bible and apply it to his her life.” Everybody knows that, right? In my licensing interview, one pastor read my statement and asked, “How does this statement square with the fact that most Christians who have ever lived have been illiterate and haven’t had their own copy of the Bible?” I had never thought about that. He had something very valuable to contribute to my spiritual development. I learned that as a pastor I shouldn’t project my calling on other people. Paul wrote to Timothy, a pastor, to “study to show yourself approved to God as workmen that need not be ashamed”; but the general command to the church at large is “let the word of Christ richly dwell within you” (Colossians 3:16).

Instead of being unteachable and resistant to the input of elders, young men are to welcome this type of oversight. But of course it’s a two-way street. And young men aren’t the only ones who need to consider their attitude toward others. And so Peter follows up his challenge to young men this way:

5 You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Peter broadens out his comments to the entire church community when he writes, “All of you” clothe yourselves with humility. This is why I say that every single person here at Faith E Free should exhibit humility toward every single other person in the church. There’s a tendency in churches to give some people a “pass” on qualities like humility. “Yeah, she’s not particularly good at the whole humility thing. . . she’s kind of a know-it-all and makes people feel crummy,

but she's got a lot of other good qualities." To the contrary, Peter is challenging every single person in the church to be humble: ***All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another.***

When he says, "clothe yourselves with humility," he is saying ***wear humility like a garment.*** Drape humility over yourself so that it's the thing that people see when they encounter you in the church. I don't know how intentional you were concerning what you'd wear to church this morning. But Peter's challenge suggests that we should be very intentional about putting on humility when we gather for worship, for Life Groups, for ministry, for meetings, etc. The mindset should be, "By the grace of God people are going to see humility in my life today."

A couple of weeks ago we considered Philippians 2 in which Paul wrote that that's the attitude we see in Jesus Himself. As a supreme act of humility Jesus considered us as more important than Himself, became one of us and died for our sins. If I clothe myself with humility, I enter into conversations with you thinking, "Your needs are more important than my needs. You aren't here to serve me; I'm here to serve you." Humility isn't thinking more lowly of yourself than you should; humility is more a matter of not thinking of yourself. You think of others and their needs. Doing so will have a profound impact on the way you think about people, talk to people, and treat people.

There are many reasons why we have a hard time clothing ourselves with humility toward others. Another way to say the same thing is: there are many reasons why we are prideful toward other people. One of the main reasons we are prideful is because we normally think, "I don't really have a need to be humble toward this person because I'm right and they're wrong. If you want to know the truth, I'm superior in this instance." With that mindset, we feel justified in being impatient, unkind, and angry toward other people. We don't need to be humble; they need to "get it." Consequently, we feel justified in holding grudges and in having an air of superiority toward others. And when somebody calls us on our impatience or anger, we are tempted to say, "But I'm right!"

William Law pointed out that "pride grows on our virtues." Dorothy Sayers pointed out that pride "attacks us, not in our weakest points, but in our strongest. It is preeminently the sin of the noble mind" (Fairlie, p. 43).

All of this begs the question, "Is it possible to be right and still clothe yourself with humility?" Is it possible to be humble even when you're surrounded by people who are inferior to you? This is where the example of Jesus is so helpful. If Jesus were sarcastic, I think He'd probably say, "I've been right once or twice and I'm still patient and kind and gentle and humble in heart. . ." And so it's obviously possible to be right all the time and still be humble.

Humility isn't a function of being inferior to people; humility is a function of love. If I love people I will be humble toward them; if I really don't care about others maturing in Christ I will be prideful toward them. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul wrote that you can have all wisdom and all knowledge (you can be right 99% of the time), but if you don't have love, all that "rightness" is worthless in the kingdom. Love is patient, kind, forgiving, etc. In other words, love is humble. Humility is a mindset and a conviction that we carry with us into every interaction we have with

other people. Humility will look different in different circumstances. But the mindset is always the same: “I will put your needs above my own because you are created in the image of God. And like Jesus my Lord, I am here to serve, not to be served.”

Let’s consider the last part of verse 5. This saying was quoted in James 4 which we considered last week.

5 You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for ***God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.***

This is actually verifiable in relationships. When we clothe ourselves with humility, God gives us grace. And we God’s grace in the church. In the church we deal with all sorts of issues that dramatically affect people’s lives. In the church people *feel* deeply about things and *care* deeply about decisions that are made. And that’s how it should be; we should care deeply. Without the grace of God, disagreements can cause division and strife. But the promise is that when we clothe ourselves with humility, God gives grace. That’s really been my experience. I can think of situations that had the potential of being very volatile, but when both sides showed humility (genuinely caring about the others’ interests), God gave His grace in amazing measure. People understand, people give the benefit of the doubt, and people say the most generous things. God gives grace when we clothe ourselves with humility.

When we walk in pride, God opposes us. He refuses to endorse our pride by blessing our relationships. In His wisdom and mercy, God disciplines us by allowing us to experience all sorts of relational pain that results from pride: strife, grudges, bitterness, isolation, etc. It’s not always the case, but many times we should make the connection between our pride and the troubles we’re experiencing in relationships in the body of Christ. It is miserable to try to make relationships work without the grace of God. (Proverbs 6 mentions “haughty eyes” as one of the things that God hates.)

Just to confirm that humility before each other and humility before God rise or fall together, let’s read the next couple of verses in 1 Peter 5.

6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, 7 casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you.

Humility before God and humility before each other go hand in hand. If you weren’t here last week to hear Brian’s message on humility before God, you can get the podcast on our web site. C.S. Lewis said that “those who look down [upon others] all the time will not look up to find God” (cited in Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, p. 42). Humility before God and humility before each other go hand in hand.

Application: Clothing ourselves with humility through our words (Ephesians 4:29)

I want us to spend some time on one specific way in which we can clothe ourselves with humility toward each other: in our words. Listen to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:29.

29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

Paul is describing what humility looks like in our speech. Instead of being self-centered and self-serving, Paul is advocating speech which is others-centered and which serves others.

He begins with what we're supposed to avoid saying: *let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth*. The term unwholesome means "rotten" or "decayed." When you think about it we shouldn't have anything rotten or putrid in our mouths to begin with. I once heard Elizabeth Eliot say that you should "taste your words before you speak them." If your words are bitter or rotten, don't say them. Great harm is done by saying poisonous things and then saying, "I'm just being honest." Venting and telling people off may feel good at the time, but it does more damage than you know. James said the tongue is like a fire: it's small but it can set off a world of devastation.

Instead of being selfish and self-serving with our words, Paul says to speak "only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment. . ." Edification simply means to build up; instead of tearing others down with your words, you build them up. This doesn't mean, of course, that you only say nice things; but even when you confront something in the other person, you do so with a view toward their good. Imagine being so focused in on the needs of others that the words you speak are those that address the need of the moment.

Of course this type of speech flows from our hearts. Jesus said that our mouths speak from that which fills our hearts. So this type of speech isn't something you can fake. Like Jesus we need to be "gentle and humble in heart."

The goal of all this is "so that it will give grace to those who hear." Our words are supposed to be gifts to the people who hear them. Instead of taking with our words, we are supposed to give. I know people who use their words this way. When I walk away from a conversation with them – even when we've talked about hard things – it's like I'm carrying away an arm-full of gifts. They've given me powerful encouragement about how I should live my life.

Can you imagine what this church would be like if every single person spoke to every single other person in this way? Imagine the grace we would give each other. Imagine the grace God would give us all. That's the type of church I want to be part of! That's the type of church God wants us to be.

There is too much at stake to be prideful toward anybody else in the body of Christ. We are called to give life to each other and to the world around us. We obviously cannot do this without the grace of God, therefore, we should obviously clothe ourselves in humility.

Let me lastly remind us that when God demands something of us, He also empowers us to live it out. All of us clothing ourselves in humility is actually possible by the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ you now have the capacity to wear humility like a garment; you have the capacity to clothe yourself with humility.