

## ***Learning Humility***

### ***Deuteronomy 8***

Last week we studied the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18. There we saw that ***True disciples of Jesus are humble toward God and everybody else***. Since Jesus was humble toward God and toward the people he came to save, his disciples should be also. Therefore you almost cannot overstate the importance of humility for Jesus' disciples. Three hundred years ago William Law pointed out that you might as well think you can "see without eyes or live without breath" as to think that you can be a disciple of Jesus without humility (my paraphrase).

Today's message is a follow-up to last week's message. We are going to study a passage which describes one of the core ways that we can (and should) learn humility in everyday life. If we are teachable and if we pay attention, we will find God to be very skillful and faithful to teach us humility in everyday life.

The passage is Deuteronomy 8. Moses is speaking to the children of Israel when they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt forty years earlier. They had seen undeniable miracles. They had entered into a covenant with them on Mt. Sinai. In that context Moses, in Deuteronomy 8, has the people look back to the wilderness and look forward to the Promised Land. He tells them that since God was teaching them humility in the wilderness, they need to remain humble in the Promised Land.

After I read this chapter we will consider how this pattern is relevant for us - learning humility in times of scarcity and avoiding pride in times of abundance.

### **READ Deuteronomy 8.**

***Learning humility in times of scarcity.*** (Deuteronomy 8:1-6) When I say "times of scarcity," I am referring to the hard times in our lives. Those hard times might involve your finances or your health or important relationships in your life or something else. Those times of scarcity are when we best learn humility. That's what God was doing in the lives of the children of Israel in the wilderness.

2 And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.

The children of Israel weren't wandering aimlessly in the wilderness; God was leading them. Moses says that God led them for forty years in the wilderness ***"that he might humble you."*** God humbled them through their circumstances. But there's a difference between "being humbled" and learning humility. Moses said that God humbled them in order to expose what was in their hearts.

Perhaps you've noticed that when you are humbled by your circumstances, whatever is in your heart comes out. If your heart is full of faith, you trust God like never before. If

your heart is full of pride and self-sufficiency, you grumble and complain and try to satisfy your desires independent of God. That's what the children of Israel did. Instead of keeping God's commandments, they grumbled against Moses and against God. They actually said that they would rather return to slavery in Egypt than follow God in the wilderness; at least in Egypt they had plenty to eat.

But God was a good Father, and the wilderness was a good classroom for learning humility. Notice in verse 3 what God was teaching them:

3 And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

God's curriculum involved humbling them with hunger (which is different from starvation) and then feeding them manna, which He spoke into existence each morning. From that experience day after day, they were supposed to learn to be dependent on every word that came out of the mouth of God. In a very literal sense, God didn't speak, they wouldn't eat. They were supposed to learn that their life wasn't ultimately sustained by bread; their life was sustained by God speaking.

That realization should make them believe that **everything** God says is significant. As verse 1 says, "All the commandments that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do. . ." Obedience is at the heart of humility before God. It's the attitude, "God, you are my Creator and Sustainer. I am completely dependent upon you and your words. You provide for me physically AND spiritually. You know better than me how I should live. Therefore your words are my delight."

4 "Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. 5 "Thus you are to know in your heart that the Lord your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. 6 "Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.

Their time in the wilderness was like adolescence - a time to learn basic truths and lessons that set them up for adulthood. Like the father in the book of Proverbs wanted his son to remember the lessons learned in childhood, Moses was concerned that the children of Israel remember the lessons learned in the wilderness.

This perspective is found throughout Scripture. For example, in James 1 we read that God refines us through the trials we experience. We can come out on the other side of trials with perseverance and maturity. [See James 1:2-4]

Think of a time in your life when you were humbled by your circumstances. Perhaps you were like the children of Israel who had no way of providing what they needed. . . perhaps you were desperate for God to do something that you could do for yourself. How did you respond during that time of scarcity? Were you teachable? or not so much?

I know for a fact that some of you have **learned humility during your times of scarcity**. I seen you cry out to God for mercy and grace. Instead of grumbling and giving up on God, you've keep seeking him. Like Job you've said, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Instead of becoming bitter and cynical and hardened, your faith has deepened and your heart has become more sensitive to the tender mercies of the Lord. You've learned humility.

Others you may look back on times of scarcity and realize that you **squandered the opportunity to learn humility** and dependence upon God. I've done that more times than I'd like to admit. Instead of thinking, "Here is a golden opportunity for me to trust God and experience his faithfulness," I just wanted the trial to be over. If I'm describing you, there's no value in self-condemnation; but you may need to apologize to God and resolve to be more teachable the next time hardships come (it's a matter of when, not if they will come).

Some of you are in **times of scarcity right now** - financially, relationally, spiritually. You are facing "problems" that you cannot solve. Maybe you are exhausted and you don't know how much more disappointment and hardship you can take. Without in any way trivializing what you're going through, I would encourage you to **believe** that this season of scarcity is a classroom in which God wants to teach you to be more humble and more dependent on him. [By the way, you don't have to figure out **why** you're experiencing hardships. I've seen people consumed with the "why questions" to the neglect of their discipleship, which involves learning humility.]

Let's consider the rest of Deuteronomy 8 and. . .

**Avoiding pride in times of abundance.** (Deuteronomy 8:7-18)

Beginning in verse 7 Moses tells the people about the life they will have in the Promised Land. Specifically he wanted them to anticipate the temptations of abundance. They would be making a transition from "a great and terrible wilderness" (1:19, 8:15) to a "good land" with abundant water and good soil. They wouldn't have to trust God for food and for water in the way they did in the wilderness. The temptation would be to become self-sufficient and to quit depending on God. Therefore, Moses gives this command:

10 And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.

When they experienced abundance of food, they were to express their gratitude directly to God. They would "bless the Lord" through thanksgiving reminding themselves that even though it didn't show up miraculously each morning, **God had provided it** through the land he had given them.

One commentator noted this verse is the rationale for the Jewish tradition of giving thanks both before **and** after a meal: the NASB translated this verse, "when you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God. . ." (see also 1 Timothy 3:3-5). I'd never heard of this tradition when I first read about it several years ago; so I emailed my [then] 86-year-old Jewish mother to ask her if that really was a thing. She

emailed me back, “Stevie, have you googled it?” I googled it, and it’s a thing! I would commend the practice to you, at least for a season.

Moses continues to warn about the temptations of abundance.

11 “Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, 12 lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, 13 and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, 14 then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,

Moses warned them, “If you are not careful, your prosperity and abundance will make you proud and self-sufficient.” Look at the warning in verse 17:

17 Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’

Moses warned them about going from being humble in scarcity to being prideful in abundance, saying, “**My** power and the strength of **my** hand made me this wealth.” But wait a minute, you might be thinking, “Their effort **was** involved; they would have to work hard with their own hands to become wealthy.” That’s true. But notice how Moses anticipates this point in verse 18:

18 “But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

Moses reminded them that God is the one who gave them life and breath, the will to work, strong bodies, skills, etc. This reflects the biblical idea of stewardship: everything we have - including the will to work hard - has been given to us by God. Everything (see 1 Cor. 4:7).

Let’s consider briefly a couple of examples related to avoiding pride in abundance, one positive and one negative.

***Positive: King David (1 Chronicles 29)***

King David understood very well what Moses was teaching in Deuteronomy 8. He spent his 20s as a fugitive, running from King Saul who wanted to kill him; it was a decade of scarcity, to say the least. But after he had been king for many years, he called the nation to bring offerings that his son Solomon would use to build the temple. When he saw that the people had brought more than enough to fund the building of the temple, David prayed the amazing prayer recorded in 1 Chronicles 29.

12 Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. 13 And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name. 14 “But who am I,

and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.

David understood that their wealth was a gift of God. They could give so generously because God had been so generous to them. He remained humble even though he had abundance.

**Negative: Nebuchadnezzar** (*Daniel 4*) Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian king who had taken Israel into exile in the 6th century b.c. One day he was walking around on the roof of his palace meditating on how great he was. We read this in Daniel 4:30:

30 and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"

That's exactly what Moses warned Israel **not** to think and say. While he was still speaking, God's judgment came. He basically became like a beast living in the wild. After a period of insanity, Nebuchadnezzar raised his eyes to heaven and his reason returned to him. Instinctively he did what Moses told the people to do: He "blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him. . ." (4:34). In Daniel 4:37 we find this praise on his lips:

37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

He found out the hard way that God is able to humble those who walk in pride. God wanted the children of Israel to **learn** that same lesson in the wilderness (in their time of scarcity) and **remember** that lesson in the Land (in their time of abundance).

If you are in a season of abundance (as I am in many ways), one of the great challenges of your discipleship is to avoid pride, thinking that you no longer need to seek God with **all** your heart, should and might. . . or deny yourself, take up your cross **daily** and follow Jesus. . . thinking you've earned the right to be selfish and self-indulgent. The good news is that if you read the Scriptures honestly and prayerfully, you will find many passages that challenge your pride and urge you to see everything you have - materially, spiritually, relationally, etc. - as gifts from God to be used for His purposes. For example, you can avoid pride through:

- **Giving.** In Matthew 6 Jesus taught His disciples to give to the poor without fanfare. Resist the temptation to make sure other people know how generous you are with your money; it's enough that your heavenly Father sees and rewards in his own ways.
- **Contentment.** The tenth commandment (Deuteronomy 5:21) says, "You shall not covet" anything your neighbor has. Instead of continually chasing after a higher standard of living, you can learn to be content. Philip Yancey tells the story of a man who went to a monastery for a time of prayer and solitude. After being shown to his

quarters, the monk told him, "If there's anything you need, let us know and we will teach you how to live without it."

- **Spiritual Humility.** Whereas the Pharisee in last week's parable embodied spiritual pride, the Apostle Paul (a former Pharisee) was spiritual humble. Evidence of that is found in 1 Corinthians 15:8-11 where he wrote that he "worked harder than any of [the apostles]." But his explanation was NOT that he was spiritually superior to them; his explanation was that "it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." "I am what I am by the grace of God." Paul's life illustrates that we should be humbled by any gains we make spiritually because it is purely the grace/gift of God working in us.

If we are teachable and attentive, God can teach us and lead us in seasons of abundance.

In summary, by God's grace we can learn humility in times of scarcity; and by God's grace we learn to avoid pride in times of abundance. The fact that Paul did this is reflected in his statement in Philippians 4:12-13.

12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.