

Trinity 17

Humility Before God Is Confidence in His Salvation

Luke 14:1-11

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“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

With these words our Lord Jesus not only sums up his parable, but he sums up one of the most common lessons throughout Holy Scripture. In his parable he explains that it is wise to pick the lowest place when invited to a wedding feast, because it is better to be told to come up higher than to be humiliated by being told to give up your seat for someone more important than you and walk blushing to a lower seat. This seems like good practical advice. There is no sense in trying to exalt yourself. It's much better to let others lift you up. If a young man trying to impress a girl brags about how he can dunk a basketball, the girl will think much less of him if he then fails to reach the net than if he had never bragged at all. We can think of many more examples of how people are humiliated, because they claim to be something that they are not. Yet, if you work hard and let your work speak for yourself, you are much more likely to have others praise you. Yet, Jesus is not simply giving practical advice on how to deal with people. Jesus is giving us the most important lesson for how we should behave before God and how God acts toward us!

The entire Bible is filled with examples of God exalting the humble and humbling the proud. Cain was the first-born man on earth. His mother praised him at his birth. Yet, God accepted his younger brother Abel's offering and rejected the offering of proud Cain. God chose Abraham, a man who called himself “dust and ashes,” to be the father of his chosen people. God chose Abraham's younger son Isaac instead of the older and prouder Ishmael. God chose the younger brother Jacob over his older and favored brother Esau. God chose stuttering Moses to lead his people against mighty Pharaoh. God let the armies of Israel be defeated when they marched against their enemies confident in their great numbers. Yet, he gave Israel victory when they went out with much fewer soldiers trusting in the Lord for victory. God didn't choose Jesse's older, taller, and stronger sons, but the meek young boy David to be king over Israel. He

didn't choose a queen in a fine palace, but a poor Galilean girl to give birth to His Son in a stable in the lowly town of Bethlehem. This is why the Virgin Mary herself sang "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has exalted the lowly."

Why is this the consistent pattern throughout Scripture? Why does God humble the proud and exalt the humble? Because he saves by grace, that is, he saves as a gift apart from works. We do not save ourselves. Only God can save.

And this also teaches us what it means to be humble before God. To be humble before God means to repent of your sins and trust in God for forgiveness and salvation. This is why we begin our worship by confessing our sins before God, acknowledging that we are poor, miserable sinners, who deserve both temporal and eternal punishment. It does you no good to deny your sinful condition. It does you no good to defend your sins or explain them away or make excuses. To be humble before God means that you acknowledge your sinful condition and acknowledge real sins that you have committed. To refuse to repent, to refuse to say sorry to God for what you have done wrong is to exalt yourself. It is to lift yourself up to a higher position, to sit at a higher seat. Yet, God will still see that you are a sinner. He will humble you. And the humiliation that comes from refusing to repent is damnation.

Yet, to be humble before God does not only mean that you are sorry for your sins. It includes faith in God's forgiveness. Indeed, unless you have faith in God's forgiveness, you cannot truly humble yourself. And it is a lack of faith in God's mercy and forgiveness that drives so many to try to exalt themselves. Why do they try to lift themselves up? Because they are afraid to wait on God's mercy! They doubt that God will actually forgive them if they were to acknowledge how far they fall short. But to humble oneself before God involves waiting on the Lord, knowing that he will indeed forgive, rescue, and restore you!

Yet, it is also important not to confuse humility with uncertainty. Often times people will interpret a Christian's confidence in the Gospel with pride. And worse, Christians will think that their own confidence in God's Word and promise is prideful. So, in an attempt to be humble, they will doubt God's word. They'll be timid and say they are not sure whether Baptism really forgives sins and saves or

whether Jesus' true body and blood are really present in the Lord's Supper. They'll doubt whether the pastor actually has authority to forgive sins. They'll be unsure whether Jesus really is the only way to heaven, or whether we can actually know the truth. They'll doubt whether salvation is really a pure gift or whether they must do enough good works to be saved. This uncertainty and doubt are falsely interpreted as humility, but it is nothing of the sort! Rather, it is arrogant pride that would cast doubt on the true words of Christ and subjugate Holy Scripture to the fickle thoughts of men.

True humility is to stand on the Word of God, to believe God's promises in Christ and to hold on to these promises even against the whole world and every devil of hell! This is why Scripture says, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." And why St. Paul writes, "When I am weak, then I am strong." St. Paul is strong, because he holds on to God's word and promise against all attacks and persecutions. When you boldly confess your faith in Christ, in the Baptism with which he washes you, in the Supper he feeds you, in the forgiveness he declares to you, yes, in every word he teaches you in Scripture, your boldness is not pride, but humility; you trust not in yourself, but in Christ your Lord.

True humility produces true love. Love is the fulfillment of the law. Yet, we know that we cannot fulfill the law. Rather, the law exposes us as sinners and condemns us for our sin. This is why our faith requires humility. We acknowledge that we have fallen short. We acknowledge that we are sinners. In humility we receive forgiveness and salvation as a gift, which we have not earned. Yet, this faith produces fruits of love that those who refuse to humble themselves can never produce.

If you trust in yourself to fulfill the law and to please God instead of humbly repenting of your sins and trusting in Christ, then you will fail to love. Look at the Pharisees, who despised the man suffering from dropsy. They thought they were righteous. They thought they had fulfilled the law. Yet, they lacked love! They arrogantly sat themselves at the high table and Christ humiliated them.

This is the story of Satan. Satan was an exalted angel. Yet, it is said, he attempted to usurp Christ's high position and as a result was cast down from heaven. This is why Jesus tells his disciples, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." (Luke 10:18) And so, everyone who tries to exalt himself

follows in Satan's steps. And as Satan was cast down to hell, so will everyone who refuses to humble himself.

Yet, as Satan sought to exalt himself, Jesus did the exact opposite. No one had claim to a higher position than Jesus the Son of God. Yet, he humbled himself by taking on the form of a servant. And although he had no sins of his own, he took on our sin in human flesh and died the humiliating death of crucifixion on a cross. The guilt of all mankind, including all your guilt, clung to Christ Jesus and he took responsibility for it all. No being ever has or ever will endure such humiliation. And as a result, Scripture says, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:9-11)

Therefore, everyone who has faith in Jesus follows in his humility, not in an attempt to make atonement for his own sins, but in confidence that as God the Father raised up Christ, so he will raise up everyone, who trusts in the atonement Christ. As we follow Christ in his humiliation, so we follow him in his exaltation.

This humility produces true love, because it receives the love of Jesus. You can count others more significant than yourself, because you trust that God will make up for anything you lose here on earth. As Jesus out of love for you humbled himself, so you have the desire out of love to humble yourself to your neighbor. Imperfectly, yes. In this life you remain tainted by sin in your actions. Yet, faith still produces its fruit to demonstrate who you really are in Christ Jesus.

When Jesus says, "he who humbles himself will be exalted," he is promising us that God will exalt us to heaven if we repent of our sins and trust in Christ. As Jesus endured the greatest humiliation, even laying his body down to death, confident that God will exalt him out of the grave and into heaven, so we humble ourselves before God confident in his promise to lift us up. In humility we acknowledge our salvation as a free gift, which we have not earned, but which God gladly and willingly bestows on us for Christ's sake. Amen.