

## ***HUMILITY***

### **Psalm 131**

**October 4, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

*Humility* is a difficult topic, whether it be in pulpit proclamation or in practical living. The difficulty comes on two or three fronts. First, we, that being me, you, and everyone else, are a proud people. Our pride is, or at least should be, a constant battle. I agree with the way C. J. Mahaney begins his book on humility, “I am a proud man pursuing humility by the grace of God.”<sup>1</sup> Last week Joel Beeke mentioned a number of things that characterized the great preachers of old. Two in particular: They were great men of prayer and they were men who battled pride.<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards called pride “the worst viper that is in the heart” and “the greatest disturber of the soul’s peace and sweet communion with Christ.” He ranked pride as the most difficult sin to root out, and “the most hidden, secret and deceitful of lusts.” Despite this understanding of the sinfulness of pride, Edwards admitted his own struggle against it. “What a foolish, silly, miserable, blind, deceived poor worm am I, when pride works,” he wrote. He constantly warned against pride in his sermons and writings, especially spiritual pride, which he considered to be the cause of the premature ending of the Great Awakening.<sup>3</sup>

Another reason that *humility* is such a difficult topic is that many have bought into the popular yet false belief that “the Lord helps those who help themselves.” As we will see in a moment, while we should be aspiring to do good works for the Lord, we are often blinded by selfish ambition, somehow thinking that God owes us something. But this robs God of His work of grace in our lives. While we certainly should be taking care in working out our salvation, we must never lose sight that it is by God’s grace working in us and through us that we are able to do so (Philippians 2:12-13).

And of course, speaking or writing about *humility* has a self-evident problem: If someone claims to be an authority on humility then we probably should automatically think him unqualified to speak on the subject. However, it is not impossible for one to speak on humility or to be humble, for that is exactly what we glean from the psalmist in Psalm 131. In it we see a man who has experienced the forgiveness found in Psalm 130. The two psalms go together. In Psalm 131 we learn that those who have received God’s merciful forgiveness will demonstrate a humble, childlike faith and encourage others to do the same.

#### **I. The Marks of Humility (131:1)**

C. J. Mahaney defines humility as “honestly assessing ourselves in light of God’s holiness and our sinfulness.”<sup>4</sup> That is exactly what the psalmist does in verse 1. The journey towards humility must begin the way the he begins his prayer, “**O LORD.**” We might tend to overlook this in our reading, but friends “**O LORD**” is crucial for without God humility is impossible. God is both the foundation and the source for true spiritual humility. Here the psalmist, in this case David, uses the covenant name for God, Yahweh, “I Am.” David remembered that God, in accordance with His name, had promised to always be what He would be for His people. David knew, both in Word and experience, that apart from the grace of God he could do nothing –

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<sup>1</sup> C. J. Mahaney, *Humility*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> 2009 Expositors’ Conference, September 28-29, Mobile AL.

<sup>3</sup> Mahaney, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Mahaney, 22.

especially in relation to humility. In other words, David had an understanding of God's covenant of grace and appeals to the covenant name of God and the God of that name in opening his prayer. Then David sets forth three negatives in verse 1 that he now experienced, three things that he was *not* like now because of God's grace. In these negatives we see the true marks of humility.

### 1. Conquered pride (v. 1a)

David asserts, **"My heart is not proud."** We might look at such a statement as the least humble (or conversely most prideful statement) one could make. After all, Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Is it not possible that David is deceived by his own heart? But it is David's understanding of how wicked the heart is that enables him to make the statement that his heart was not proud. The context of this psalm many believe to have been at the time David became king. He did not enter into this without plumbing the depths of his soul and crying out to God. He wished to demonstrate to the people that he had not sought the throne. Nothing was further from his mind that day as he pastured the sheep and here he makes it clear that he did not aspire the throne or have his own devised ambitions.

How different we see King Saul when compared to King David. You remember how Saul began in 1 Samuel 9. He humbly suggests to Samuel that maybe he had it wrong in selecting him as king, "Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak to me in this way?" (9:21). But we know the rest of the story. Saul's heart is revealed as he displays time and time again the foolishness of his heart and his discontentment with God and His chosen people. Saul's pride is exposed.

David said, **"My heart is not proud."** "I'm not like that. I have come to know that the heart is a tricky thing and I have learned to keep it in check." And how did he do that? By crying out daily, **"O LORD."** David was not saying that he was never proud, but that his life was marked more by humility than by pride. In this matter, in the matter of his kingship, David promoted humility and continued in it with patience surrounding the events that transpired with Saul by conquering his pride.

We too must learn to conquer pride in our hearts, and I might suggest, especially as it relates to our calling. We must take care that we do not become puffed up and lose sight of the God who called us to a life in Christ. We must take care that our salvation not be a source of pride. We like David must proclaim, **"My heart is not proud."** As with David, God sought us and gave us our position. We did not seek Him. We were worthy of nothing but damnation until God swooped into history in the person of Christ and provided the way for our reconciliation, for the dead to come to life, for the deaf to hear and the blind to see. Anyone that thinks he had one iota to do with their becoming priests in the kingdom of God is a proud man. Remember Saul. Is that not what was the beginning of Saul's downfall in 1 Samuel 13. The moment he took the priestly duties upon himself, whether knowing or unknowingly, he was slain by his pride. Samuel pronounced his doom, "But now your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you." (13:14). Rather than conquering pride, Saul's life is destroyed by it. He is proof that pride goes before destruction and comes before the fall. In the stories of these two kings, the Lord demonstrated that He is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble (Prov. 3:34; James 4:6).

## 2. Controlled vision (v. 1b)

The second negative David asserts is similar to the first, “**nor my eyes haughty.**” In Proverbs 6:16 Solomon, who had much to say proverbially about pride, wrote, “There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him.” And what are the first of those seven things? *Haughty* (or “arrogant”) *eyes*.

The eyes are the window to the soul. It is through our eyes of conscience that we see ourselves. The problem is that because of sin, our perception of ourselves is like looking in a carnival mirror. Everything is distorted and we get a warped view of reality and our spiritual condition. That is why we need God’s Word as a mirror that always accurately reflects the condition of our soul and helps us to see ourselves clearly. Paul Tripp wrote, “Since each of us still has remaining sin in us, we will have pockets of spiritual blindness... The Bible says that we can be spiritually blind and yet think we see quite well.” He goes on to point out that we are often offended when people act as if they see us better than we see ourselves.<sup>5</sup> We tend to become defensive. However, we must recognize that we have spiritual blind spots and that we need the body, we need mature believers, to help us see ourselves in light of God’s truth. What kind of Christian will we be if we only surround ourselves with people that always think like we do in all things and never point out our deficiencies? The Bible answers that – it is a recipe for an arrogant Christian! This arrogance is often demonstrated as follows:

- Think too much *about* ourselves – our rights, our concerns, our preferences, what others think of us, etc. and *not enough about God and others*
- Think too much *of* ourselves – *and less of God and others*. **Romans 12:3** – For through the grace given to me (God gives grace to the humble) I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. [see also Prov. 3:34; James 4:6]

Here is the problem—we can always make ourselves look good when we look into our mirrors at home because it reflects only the external. Using that mirror, we can even make ourselves look good to others. But God’s Word, His mirror, reflects what’s inside. And that is what matters. Again, in the story of David’s selection as king, you remember these words, “God *sees* not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). David said, “**Nor my eyes haughty.**” “I see clearly because I see as God sees.”

## 3. Contented living (v. 1c)

David next expressed his contentment with God’s plans for him in the third negative statement, “**Nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me.**” David expressed his satisfaction with God, whether he was on the throne or on the run. He received the kingdom in God’s time and in God’s way. He had been promised the crown years before it came to fruition and had even been anointed by God and the people. Yet he was content to be pursued by Saul for ten years and then to rule only over Hebron for another seven before he eventually ruled the united kingdom.<sup>6</sup> David did not let self-ambition destroy humility. That does not mean that he did not consider what was rightly his or passively sit by and do nothing. But he did not go beyond what God had for him or try to plead his rights and get it himself.

<sup>5</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 3, 1148.

Eugene Petersen defines prideful ambition as “aspiration gone crazy.” This doesn’t mean that we should not aspire to be our best or work to achieve the most for God’s glory. What is wrong, and what is the fruit of pride, is the ambition to get everything we can or do everything for ourselves, for our own glory. Petersen shows the difference between aspiration and ambition:

It is... difficult to recognize unruly ambition as a sin because it has a kind of superficial relationship to the virtue of aspiration—an impatience with mediocrity, and a dissatisfaction with all things created until we are at home with the Creator, the hopeful striving for the best God has for us... But if we take the energies that make for aspiration and remove God from the picture, replacing him with our own crudely sketched self-portrait, we end up with arrogance... Aspiration is the channeled, creative energy that moves us to grow in Christ, shaping goals in the Spirit. Ambition takes these same energies for growth and development and uses them to make something tawdry and cheap, sweatily knocking together a Babel when we could be vacationing in Eden.<sup>7</sup>

David did not get bogged down by things he could not change or by things he did not understand. He was simply content with his lot in life. He did not question God’s wisdom; he did not act as if God had forgotten him. He simply trusted God – and after all, isn’t that what humility really is?

**Matthew 18:1-4** – <sup>1</sup> At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” <sup>2</sup> And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, <sup>3</sup> and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

## II. The Result of Humility (131:2-3)

### 1. Peace for today (v. 2)

“**Surely I have composed and quieted my soul.**” This indicates that his journey in humility has been difficult, a struggle, as we know when we consider some of David’s other psalms. Perhaps that is why Spurgeon said that this Psalm was one of the shortest to read but one of the longest to learn. He went on to say, “Quieting yourself is not easy. It would be easier to calm the ocean, rule the wind, or tame a tiger. We are clamorous, uneasy, and sour, and only grace can calm us under affliction, irritation, and disappointment.”<sup>8</sup>

But it need not be this way if we would only think upon Christ’s words to us:

**Matthew 11:29-30** – <sup>29</sup> “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. <sup>30</sup> For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

David describes what this humble faith and dependence looks like in picturing a child who has been weaned from its mother. This is a child that is no longer dependent upon its mother for food and nourishment. In Hebrew society it was common for a child to be weaned around the age of 4 or 5, and you can imagine something of the difficulty of weaning a child at that age. It

<sup>7</sup> Eugene H. Petersen, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 146, 148.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 1347.

would be a process which would involve a great deal of difficulty because the child is in a sort of in between age, no longer dependent upon his mother for milk, having progressed to solid food, yet unable to stand fully on his own, unable to take care of himself. The child still must trust in the provision of his parents and is comfortable in their presence.

That describes the peace of a humble child of God. Our sanctification, our growth in holiness, is such that as we mature, as we ascend the mountain, we learn to live according to the provisions of God. It is to be satisfied with Christ! We are satisfied in what He has provided for our salvation and long to know more of Him, ever moving closer to that day when we will be like Him.

## **2. Hope for tomorrow (131:3)**

**“O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forever.”**

**1 Peter 5:6** – Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.

**COMMAND:** Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God

**PROMISE:** that He may exalt you at the proper time.

When Peter said they were to humble themselves **“under the mighty hand of God”** he used an expression that is associated particularly with God’s delivering Israel out of Egypt. The image of the mighty hand emphasizes the power of God especially as it relates to His covenant relations with His people. His covenant name is “Yahweh,” literally, “I am; I will be what I will be for My people.” We can be assured that He will make good on His promise because He is the all-powerful One. We can depend on Him!

Then the promise associated with obedience to the command: Those who submit themselves to God, the Lord will honor and exalt in due time. This theme can be traced back to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 23:12, “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” The verse promises exaltation **“at the proper time.”** Peter does not promise vindication and exaltation in this life but in a time that is suitable to God’s purposes, particularly in relation to His overall goal of redemption. This then would be in view of the Lord’s return, that day when the believer will be exalted—if they have truly demonstrated humility that is borne out of a regenerate heart.

David understood these things. He encourages all of God’s people press on in affliction, to humble themselves as he had in this psalm, and to hope in the God of the covenant, the LORD, their Deliverer, forever and ever. Amen.

## **Conclusion**

How can we weaken and kill pride and cultivate humility? Mahaney gives 17 suggestions towards this end. I will combine them into 10 and ask that you jot these, place them in your Bible or on your refrigerator or dashboard, or better yet, on you mirror at home as a reminder to do these things that cultivate inward humility of heart:

**1. Always reflect on the wonder of the cross of Christ.**

**2. Begin each day by expressing gratefulness to God and acknowledging your dependence on Him for all things.**

- 3. Begin each day practicing the spiritual disciplines—prayer, studying God’s Word, worshiping Him.**
- 4. Use your commute time to memorize and meditate on Scripture.**
- 5. Study the great doctrines of Scripture systematically.**
- 6. Identify evidences of grace in others.**
- 7. Invite correction from others and pursue correction in others.**
- 8. Encourage and serve others every day.**
- 9. Respond humbly to trials.**
- 10. End each day by giving God all the glory.**

When these things are pursued and accomplished, then we can live Psalm 131 to the glory of God. Remember Micah 6:8 – *He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*