

Sermon for September 1, 2013 – 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Proverbs 25:6-7

Theme: Be in Christ's humility, and God will exalt you.

⁶ Do not exalt yourself in the presence of the king, And do not stand in the place of the great; ⁷ For it is better that he say to you, "Come up here," Than that you should be put lower in the presence of the prince, Whom your eyes have seen.

People like to brag. It's human nature. Parents like to brag about their children. Fans like to brag about their team. The list can go on, but I think you get the point.

Our culture promotes bragging. Businesses are looking for self-confident, self-assured go-getters. They want you to convince them why they should hire you instead of the next guy. Turn on a reality show like "the Apprentice," and it does not take you long to see what I mean.

The idea that we need to be self-promoting does not limit itself to the work place. The sinful human heart is constantly trying to build itself up to be someone important. It especially wants to do this before God. You know the thought: "God, I deserve better than this. I come to church all the time – even on holiday weekends. I give much more in the offering plate than others. How come you don't bless me like Mr. NoShow, who never comes to church?" Our corrupted hearts think that they have to build themselves up before God, showing that they have earned the right for God to listen and bless them. But, as all our lessons for today show, such thinking is the exact opposite of what is true.

God loves humility. **Be in Christ's humility, and God will exalt you.**

Our sermon text is taken from the book of Proverbs and was written by the wisest man that ever lived: King Solomon. Being a king, Solomon was certainly an expert in how to find favor with a ruler. But Solomon's words is more than just practical advice as how to find favor with those in positions of power. The same thing can also be said about our Gospel lesson. When Jesus offered the advice to take the "lowest place" at a dinner, he offered far more than practical advice as how to find honor in society. No, both Solomon and Jesus want to teach a greater spiritual truth - how we find true honor before God.

God cannot stand those who exalt themselves. Consider the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector Jesus told on another occasion:

¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men-- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² 'I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' ¹³ "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' ¹⁴ "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luk 18:10-14 NKJ)

Self-promotion gets you nowhere with God. Actually, it results in just the opposite. Consider Jesus' remarks about those who brag about the things they did in God's name as reason to get to heaven. Jesus once said: ²² "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in

Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?'²³ "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Mat 7:22-23 NKJ)

The point is clear: God hates those who brag, those who feel like they deserve God's favor in anyway shape or form.

Now we might be tempted to think, "This is a good text for my Catholic neighbors to take to heart. Aren't they always trying to earn God's favor through their good works? We Lutherans, on the other hand, live by grace. We don't trust our works to save us." My answer is: Oh really? Let's be honest with ourselves. Have you never wondered why God didn't bless you like he blessed someone else? Have you never thought in your heart – "I'm a good Christian. Don't I deserve this thing I am praying for?" Maybe you never expressed these thoughts in your prayers, but you certainly have thought them in your hearts. Any Christian who claims otherwise is a liar."

No, we are guilty as charged when it comes to thinking we deserve God's blessings. God sees our hearts. He knows what goes on inside of them. Lord, have mercy on us sinners.

And praying for mercy - as the tax collector did in the temple - is exactly where God wants us. He wants us confessing our sins and unworthiness. He wants us acknowledging that we deserve nothing - that everything we have and are is a gift of his undeserved love. He wants us clothed in Christ's humility.

Do you want proof that God loves humility? Than look no further than our Epistle lesson and the example of Christ. Jesus had it all. He was with God. He was God. And yet what did Jesus do out of love for us? He humbled himself. He became a weak human just like us. He even went further than that: He took all our sins upon himself and became obedient to death on the cross. The master of all became the servant of all. He, righteousness personified, became sin personified so that He could suffer and die for all our sins.

In the presence of his Father - in the presence of the King of Kings - Jesus lowered himself. And what did God say in response to this? "Come up here, my son. Come up here!" God exalted him to the highest place ¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,* ¹¹ *and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* (Phi 2:10-11 NKJ)

Now let's be clear – the example of Jesus' humility is more than just an example for us to follow. It is the very humility we need to stand before God. What I mean is this: the sinful heart does not want to approach God in humility. It does not want to acknowledge its total corruption and need for forgiveness.

God demands perfection. God demands payment for sin. We can't even begin to offer God these things, but Jesus can and does. Unlike our hearts are inclined to do, Jesus did not stand in judgment over God's laws and say: "Hey God, these things don't make sense. They don't fit with today's culture." No, he humbled himself and was obedient to all of God's law for us – confessing that God's law is good and right.

Unlike us, Jesus did not moan and complain about how unfair life is, how we deserve better. . . No, he submitted to all the unfair suffering God sent his way. He trusted God that it would serve our salvation and glorify God's name. He was punished in our place. He made perfect payment for our sins.

Our humility and confession would be meaningless if Jesus had not humbled himself for us. This is why I said we need to be **in Christ's** humility.

What does it mean to stand before God in Christ's humility? It means to stand before God clothed with Christ – trusting in him alone for salvation.

How exactly do we enter into Christ's humility? First of all by realizing in sorrow that we have sinned against God and deserve nothing from him. It is to confess with Isaiah: ⁶ *But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.* (Isa 64:6 NKJ) Like the tax collector in the temple, we beat our breast in sorrow and say: *'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'*

And that leads me to the next point: we enter into Christ's humility by trusting that God is merciful and will forgive our sins for Christ's sake. To enter Christ's humility is to be clothed with Christ through faith. When God the Father looks at a believer, He sees His Son. And what does God do? With His Son he lifts us up, declaring us to be his children and heirs of eternal life. He exalts us to be royal priests and kings to rule with Jesus. Sharing in Christ's humility results in sharing in Christ's exaltation, as Jesus says: ²⁶ *"If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.* (Joh 12:26 NKJ)

Following Jesus in humility also has another result. It means that we will act humbly towards others, as our epistle lesson says: *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.* ⁴ *Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.* (Phi 2:3-4 NKJ). In short, *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus* (Phi 2:5 NIV84)

Christianity is not a competition against other Christians - trying to see who can win a better spot in heaven. No, following Christ means that we will work together with fellow brothers and sisters in the faith, as Jesus himself says: ¹² *"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* ¹³ *"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.* ¹⁴ *"You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. . . .* ¹⁷ *"These things I command you, that you love one another.* (Joh 15:12-14,17 NKJ)

And this love for each other will express itself in submissiveness and humility – as the Scriptures say: *Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."* ⁶ *Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time,* ⁷ *casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.* (1Pe 5:5-7 NKJ)

How should you approach God? Should you come before him thinking you are better than other Christians? Should you complain about your situation in life, and think that you deserve better from God? This is no way for sinners to approach the King of kings. ¹⁰ *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.* (Jam 4:10 NKJ) Through repentance and faith, clothe yourself with Christ's humility, and God – for Christ's sake – will exalt you with Christ to the heights of heaven. Amen