
Be Humble or Be Humbled (Proverbs 25:6-7)

A Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



Herman was working at his desk. He was a hard worker and had really been putting a lot of effort in at work lately. Just then, his phone rang. Herman answered with his usual phrasing, but suddenly realized it was his boss, Zeke. Herman had actually developed a pretty good relationship with Zeke lately and Zeke usually ran all his new ideas past Herman for his opinion.

This phone call was just that. Zeke had a new idea and wanted to talk to Herman about it. So Herman hung up and started walking toward Zeke's office, wondering what the new idea would be.

While he was walking, however, Herman's mood began to darken. Unfortunately, the building was set up so that in order to get to Zeke's office, he had to walk past Moe's desk. Moe was an absolute jerk. He never showed Herman any respect. The entire time Herman had worked here, Moe had been a constant thorn in his side.

As Herman neared Moe's desk, Herman braced himself for some comment or confrontation but, thankfully, Moe was nowhere to be seen. So, Herman shook it off and went on to Zeke's office.

When he got there Zeke gave him the big idea. "I had the idea to boost workplace morale by announcing an Employee of the Year," Zeke explained, "and I wanted to get your thoughts on what we should do. I've got a candidate in mind but I wasn't sure what we should do for him."

Herman had a flash of excitement in his face as he realized, "Zeke's talking about me!" He quickly hid his smile and pretended like he had no idea what Zeke was talking about. "Well, sir," he began, "If we really want to boost employee morale, maybe we could have an office party for this special employee. That way everyone would be able to enjoy it. Then we could set up a big plaque with a picture of the Employee of the Year right in the entrance to the office that could stay up all year. That way each employee could have that as a year round reminder of something for them to shoot for."

Herman turned away to hide the smile as he thought about a party in his honor and his face up for everyone to see. As he finished his thought, he turned back to see what Zeke's reaction.

Zeke gave Herman one of his proud smiles, one that said he really liked his idea. “I like it! I like it a lot! Herman, I’m putting you in charge of organizing the party and setting up the plaque. Our Employee of the Year is going to be Moe!”

Poor Herman. He’d really gotten himself into a mess this time. Maybe if he would have been a little more humble, he wouldn’t have been so humbled. Today in our Old Testament lesson, we hear this warning from God: Be Humble or Be Humbled.

Our Old Testament lesson for today comes from the book of Proverbs. This book is a really strange book in the Bible. It is kind of hard to classify. It’s not history. It has some poetry in it, but it’s really not a book of poetry. For the most part, the book is just a collection of proverbs, many of which are completely unrelated to the others.

Another curious point about Proverbs is that it is not primarily concerned with getting to heaven. Most of the book is really just talking about wise ways for us to live on this earth. It certainly does make clear what the most important thing is: it says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,” but most of the book is really just concerned about living wisely.

For example, just look at our Old Testament lesson. It warns us against pride, but note the reason why it warns against pride. It doesn’t say that pride is a sin that earns eternal damnation for us. Instead, it simply says that pride will lead to humiliation. Basically, the lesson is that it is better for us to live humbly because, in the end, that will gain us a better reputation. If we constantly raise ourselves up, sooner or later, we are going to be humiliated for it. If you humble yourself, however, then there is room for others to lift you up. It’s better to humble yourself, than to be humbled by someone else!

Isn’t pride a funny thing? I recently heard someone speak about pride. He asked, “Where does pride even come from?” It’s so easy for us to feel pride about things that are not even true. For example, many people are proud that they are nice people.

But are they really nice people? Compared to whom? If I’m only nice compared to some jerks I know, is that really a reason for me to take pride in how nice I am? Many people would say Mother Teresa was a nice person. She took a vow of poverty in her teens and dedicated her life to pulling poor people off the street. Can I really say that I am a nice person compared to that? Why do I

honestly think I'm a nice person? Is that really something I should take pride in?

We can do that comparison for pretty much any characteristic we see in ourselves. Are we really as smart as we think? As loving? As strong? As unselfish? But how easy it is to take pride in these things.

And still pride shows up in so many places! Pride makes us befriend only those people whom we know will pay us back, either by companionship or by something else that we want. Pride makes us look at people who have different beliefs than us or different backgrounds as though they were worse people than us, less human, as though they were somehow more sinful than us. Those people may even be individuals from whom we could learn a lot, but our pride makes us just write them off. We take pride in the thought that, "I'm not like those people." Pride makes us view ourselves as though we are high on this mountain of understanding and everyone else around us is down in the valleys of confusion.

Pride even takes over our humility. When we do humbly forget ourselves in order to raise someone else up, pride makes us notice that and we think, "Oh! Look how humble I am!" And suddenly we are proud again, proud of our own humility! Pride makes us live a lie instead of taking an honest, real look at ourselves.

Dear friends in Christ, God is not fooled by our pride. He doesn't fall for our bragging. We may boast about how good we are but God knows the truth. He knows how foolish we are, how unloving, how selfish, how prideful. He knows the truth.

And if we trust in our own strength, understanding, or kindness, one day we will be humiliated. If we try to take a seat at the great feast in heaven, touting the great things we have done, we will be told to get up and take our real seat down in hell. If we are not humble before God, one day we will be humbled.

But in Christ, we find a better way. If there was ever someone who deserved to be prideful, wouldn't that be Jesus? He is God over all! All glory and praise and honor are truly due to him! And yet he shows us true humility.

He humiliated himself by leaving behind the glories of heaven to be born as a poor human baby and to walk the earth with not even a place to call his home. He humbled himself by leaving behind his almighty power as God and he became a human who got tired and hungry, who cried when we lost his friends, who had to wait on others. He forgot himself and the glory due him so that he could

instead suffer insults and hatred and torture and death.

He did that, not to gain glory for himself, but to gain glory for his Father. He did that, not for his own good, but for our salvation. He did that, not so that he could have a good reputation, but so that you and I could have a good reputation before God. He did that, not so that he would be exalted, but so that he might raise us up from our rightful seat in hell and graciously invite us to take a greater seat next to him in heaven!

Brothers and sisters, by the salvation won for you in Christ, you have been taught what true humility is. As God's children, we know what true humility is and it is natural for us to be humble.

This is true humility: not seeking our own glory, but forgetting ourselves as we pursue the glory and the needs of others around us, just like Jesus did for us. True humility is not getting caught up in how we see ourselves, or how others see us. True humility is getting caught up in Christ's love for us. True humility is letting Christ's love consume our lives as we show that love to people around us, even to those who cannot repay us. True humility is loving even those people who are foolish, unbelieving, unkind.

Dear friends, because Jesus humbled himself, you will never face the humiliation of hell. Therefore, let the Spirit of Christ cover your life as you live humbly, knowing that you will never be humbled. Amen.