

**O Lord It's Hard to be Humble**  
**John 17:20-26, Phil 2:1-11**

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, over the next month we're going to be looking at our Christian Character and how we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit and work at becoming more and more like our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Because friends – this is how we work at fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations and being faithful to living in the Time between times, and it's a very practical way to help us take the Blessing deeper – because it's a bit difficult to bless others if we have lousy character right?

If our Christian character shows through it's a much more effective witness to the gospel than strategies, tactics and persuasive arguments because it demonstrates its power in how we are growing and changing and being transformed

As we were reminded a couple weeks ago in 2 Peter 2:12 we are to *“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good*

*deeds and glorify God”* And given how yet another church has made headlines for defying health restrictions, examining our Christian character as a witness to the power of the gospel message is timely indeed.

Because it is how our Christian character shows up in such stressful situations, how it is revealed in the eleventh hour of challenging circumstances that shows - this is not a matter of simple behaviorism, or only about public relations for good press, it's bearing witness and testimony to the power of the good news about Jesus Christ.

So as we look at our Christian character it's very important that we actually understand and grasp the whole gospel of Jesus Christ.

Otherwise working on our Christian Character quickly turns into moralism - which then perverts the gospel into a call to live better, behave ourselves better and try harder and it becomes a burden... or an opportunity for self-righteous.

And at that point we're not blessing others, we're loading them up with guilt or passing on our pride, and no one is blessing by either of those!

So – this is why we are starting our work on Christian character today by looking at humility and what it means to be humble and conduct ourselves in humility - in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ.

And in many ways brothers and sisters humility – as defined in the scriptures - is the key to truly understanding and grasping the whole gospel of Jesus Christ – so we'll get two for one here as we start out.

Listen to Romans 5:8 *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

And then Ephesians 2:4-5 *“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”*

Brothers and sisters, biblical humility is that point where we are brought to the realization - through circumstance, experience, or conviction – that there is something going on in us... something happening with us... that makes us resist God, flee from God, or attempt to impress God when He draws near to us. When we realize this, it we are humbled.

And this humility is an awareness, a self-knowledge, and realization that there is **nothing** in our will, our emotions, our spirit, our soul, our bodies – in the Heart of who we are – that is able to overcome this rebellious orientation towards God.

It is a humility which realizes we need help, we need a savior, and that such help and salvation which comes to us in Jesus Christ is an undeserved act of grace and mercy towards us.

Because - it was not, and is not God, who was and is the unfaithful covenant partner in our relationship with Him... it was Adam and Eve, it was their descendants, our fellow humans being – it is us.

So humility is really the key to correctly understanding the gospel message about our need for Jesus Christ. This is why bumper stickers can say “Jesus is the answer”

Now the question is brothers and sisters – have you come to that point? Do you realize that you are powerless and helpless to overcome what SIN truly is and how it affects you? Are you convinced that there is no amount of good behavior, scientific advancement, education, or even what we call ‘love’ that can help you with this problem?

Will you humbly come to God admitting that you need His salvation – the new and sinless humanity of Jesus Christ, his forgiveness, and his Holy Spirit?

Brothers and sisters I have to ask you this, because people have gone for many years sitting in church on Sundays not realizing that this is what it is all about – if you have not yet humbled yourself and asked God for salvation in Jesus Christ - don’t let this Sunday go by without doing that.  
(prayer for the receiving of salvation)

Now – brothers and sisters in Christ, the results of our salvation are described by Paul in Philippians 2:1. We have encouragement from being united with Christ, we are comforted by His love, we have the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and there is a tenderness and compassion in us.

And these four results result in unity among us, in the four ways outlined in vs. 2

So, being united with Christ results in our being united in like-mindedness; because we have all been given the mind of Christ. ( 1 Cor 2:16)

Next, since we are each comforted by Christ’s love, this results in a unity from having the same love. Third, since we have a common sharing in the Spirit, we are to be united by being one in spirit.

And forth, since we have tenderness and compassion, we are to be united around this, as of one mind or focus together on this.

So brothers and sisters in Christ, biblical humility leads to Christian unity.

Now Paul wants us to know that this humility is also what preserves that unity because our unity in Christ is always threatened by what is still lacking in our Christian character.

The remains of our sinful nature – which Paul identifies in vs. 3 as selfish ambition and vain conceit, or more literally “*empty glory*” always threaten to divide us and make us proud and think we are better than others in some way – even if it’s the fact that we’re doing what is right when others are not.

Now when we understand that Paul’s main concern here is for preserving Christian unity, it helps us then to understand the sorts of things that qualify as “*selfish ambition and empty glory.*”

They are the impulses, the thoughts, the beliefs, the actions, and attitudes which undo the ways in which Paul has describe we are united.

So something can be considered a selfish ambition or an empty glory if it promotes another mind instead of the mind of Christ... if it seeks another kind of love instead of the love of Christ, if it is motivated by another spirit rather than the Holy Spirit, and if it does not keep us focused on tenderness and compassion.

Now brothers and sisters in Christ – it’s important that we actually change our understanding of humility – and adopt the biblical humility which is all about preserving unity.

Otherwise we will be tempted by the enemy to misunderstand humility, and misuse the biblical call to humility to justify our self-doubt and engage in unnecessary self-denial – do you know what I mean?

It’s this sort of thinking... “Do I apply for that job with better pay or should I just stay in my current position? Well Philippians 2:3 says “*do nothing out of selfish ambition*” and I know I really would like that increase in pay – so I guess that’s a selfish ambition and so I shouldn’t apply...”

Or the NIV bible used to translate the last part of vs.3 like this  
“... in humility consider others better than yourselves.”

And unfortunately, this usage of a superlative for the translation – you know good, better, best... had us acting just plain silly at times.

“Phil 2:3 says “*consider others better than yourself*” so I can’t say that I’m better at anything than anyone else, rather I need to consider that they are better than me... so even though I am the only one who has all the right qualifications to apply for that job opening in the office, I should consider others better qualified than I am.”

Friends, don’t go there! In fact this sort of thinking does not come from the mind of Christ, and thus is can ironically be considered as “empty glory” and is not biblical humility which preserves Christian unity.

Fortunately the NIV has tweaked its translation of the Greek here in vs. 3-4 so that is now reads; “*Do nothing out of selfish*

*ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”*

So, the comparative aspect which trips us up is gone – and instead the emphasis is about valuing the group “others” above ourselves “the individual” – which is much more applicable to our situation in the West with our rampant individualism and chronic need for self-identification and self-expression and our rights and freedoms regardless of the how it might affect others.

But there’s more at stake here than just shifting away from a perverse hyper-individualism.

In this improved translation - the part of about looking to the interests of others has become the second half of a new sentence instead of being its own sentence as before.

So now it effectively becomes the definition of what it means to put the groups’ needs ahead of your own.

So, we can summarize all of this up to say that biblical humility is about preserving Christian unity by putting the needs and concerns and mission of the body of Christ before our own and also that the Body of Christ puts the needs of those whom it is called to disciple before its own needs.

So how do we do this? What does it look like? Well Paul can think of no better example for us to follow than that of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we might say that's a tall order to follow, but Paul knows this is possible for us because we have been given the mind of Christ, if you have received the Holy Spirit you have Christ's mind – that is something that unites us.

So Paul instructs us *“In your relationships with one another have the same mind-set as Jesus Christ.”* (vs. 5)

And this mind-set is characterized by not using whatever status, advantages, gains, benefits or talents we have been given for our own advantage – but using them like Christ did,

emptying himself out, who poured himself out, using who He was by nature - in service to us.

And you know friends – it's that display of humility in Christ, where God becomes human, that helps to move us into a place of humility to receive Him as savior.

Jesus came to save us in a very humble way, a humiliating way in fact, when you consider what the cross stood for. It was kept for only the vilest and most despicable criminals.

So even though He was God's gift to the world - He didn't flaunt it, He didn't act arrogantly, and He did not give the impression that people were projects to be fixed, instead He served our needs and put them ahead of His own...

And through the hidden working of the Holy Spirit this helped to reveal our actual needs to us, through meeting our felt needs...

In meeting the needs for healing, for food and drink, for teaching, for mercy and compassion and hope Jesus revealed our deepest needs to have our spiritual eyes opened, to be born again, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to receive new life – His very own flesh and blood...

Jesus even met the need of our sinful nature that flares up in anger and hatred when God draws close to us... what do I mean by that?

Well – Jesus humbly gave himself over to our sinful desire to humiliate and kill him, and in doing so Jesus humbly revealed to us that our humanity needs redemption – while simultaneously in His very person being that redemption which we need.

Which, when you meditate and reflect on this, leaves us in awe of God’s plan – and very humbled, for who among us would be able to accomplish and fulfill such a plan?

And yet through giving us the great commission and the ascending (vs.9) and pouring out the Holy Spirit upon us – Jesus expects us to participate in the furthering and fulfillment of God’s plan.

Humbling yet again... Who are we to have contributed to the end result that *“at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... that every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father?”* (vs. 10-11) When it was so difficult for us to come to that point – impossible really had it not been for the Lord’s choosing us for His salvation.

So it’s incredible really when you consider it all.

Brothers and sisters, I pray that you are starting to get a sense of what biblical humility is all about, and what Paul is encouraging us to do in our relationships with each other in order to stay unified as Christians?

Even better yet brothers and sisters, are you experiencing the Holy Spirit working among us this morning, moving in your hearts and producing that humility?

Have you been humbled? And as we live and work together as the body of Christ, will you continue to humble yourself for the unity of the Church? So that you may truly be a blessing to others and take that blessing deeper?

Will you co-operate with the Holy Spirit's transforming work in you so that our Lord's prayer will be answered?

Brothers and sisters, as let us be reminded this morning, and humbled by what our Lord Jesus prayed for – for us...

In John 17:21-23 we hear Jesus asking God the Father to do something about us – Jesus asked: *“May [my church at Valleyview] also be in us, so that the world [their community] may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to*

*complete unity. Then the world [their community] will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”* (John 17:21-23)

Brothers and sisters, this is how we are blessed to be a blessing to others.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will do His powerful transforming work among us this morning and birth humility in our hearts.

That He will show us who we truly are before God and that it will humble us, that we will be united in that humility, that it will become an integral part of our Christian character – so much so - that we don't even have to work at it...

Let me close off with an example of that for you.

Maybe you've heard of Booker T. Washington – the renowned African American educator of the late 1800's.



It is said that shortly after he took over the presidency of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881, he was walking in an exclusive section of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. Not knowing the famous Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her.

That was certainly an opportunity to be offended by this presumptuous and ignorant very racist request.

However – as the story goes since he had no pressing business at the moment, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. A little girl recognized him and later revealed his identity to the lady.

The next morning the embarrassed woman went to see Mr. Washington in his office at the Institute and apologized profusely. “It’s perfectly all right, Madam,” he replied. “Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it’s always

a delight to do something for a friend.” She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his meek and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute.

What a great example of how Christian humility can be shown in trying circumstances and how the Lord will use that to accomplish far more blessings for His Kingdom than we ever can through our own pride.

Brothers and sisters, let us remember that *“the Lord opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.”* (James 4:6)

May the Lord give us biblical humility brothers and sisters – and may others be blessed by it. Amen.