

Psalm 131
Christian Discipleship: Growing in Humility

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There are 15 songs of ascent, Psalms 120-134. The Psalm read for us this morning, Psalm 131, is the twelfth. The songs of ascent help the Christian disciple develop language and understanding around repentance, worship, service, work, perseverance, hope, joy. The songs of ascent help the Christian disciple learn how to think about faith and suffering, learn what to do during challenges, and learn how to relate to God in our pain. The songs of ascent teach the Christian disciple who God is: merciful, the one who is on high, provider, protector, saviour, helper, righteous, forgiver. The songs of ascent help us grow in Christian maturity by reminding us of what is true, even when our emotions and feelings suggest something else. The songs of ascent remind us individually and as a church how to live faithfully as God's redeemed people. In short, the songs of ascent are the Christian believer's companion on the road of Christian discipleship.

This morning we'll consider the twelfth song of ascent, Psalm 131. When commenting on this Psalm, Charles Spurgeon said it is "one of the shortest psalms to read but one of the longest to learn". At only 3 verses, it is quite short but I hope that this morning we will see that though short, it still contains a powerful and important message for the church and the Christian believer. If all you hear from this morning's message is one thing, know this: the Psalm is about humility, what it is, how to cultivate it, and why it matters.

There are dozens of Scripture texts in the Bible which mention humility. Many of us are familiar with some of them:

Colossians 3:12 "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

Ephesians 4:2 "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."

James 4:10 “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”

1 Peter 5:5 “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble”.

Or consider the familiar Old Testament text in Micah 6:8 “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

There are also a handful of Proverbs that speak about humility. I’ll mention two:

Proverbs 3:34 “He mocks proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.”

Proverbs 22:4 “Humility is the fear of the Lord; its wages are riches and honor and life.”

Humility is a virtue, an attitude, a disposition, a posture that the Christian believer exhibits in relationship with God and with others. Using imagery and descriptive language, Psalm 131 unpacks what humility means and how the Christian believer cultivates a life that is humble.

The Psalmist begins by pointing out two opposite dispositions or traits of the human being: pride and humility. The Psalmist begins with this simple yet weighty statement: *My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.*

In this opening line, the Psalmist is helping us understand humility by telling us what it is not.

The Hebrew word that we translate as proud also means lofty, high, exalted, risen. Humility is not these: humility is not proud, not lofty, not high, not exalted. Secondly, in this opening line, the Psalmist is also helping us understand humility by telling us how not to approach life. In the

statement “*I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me*”, the Hebrew word that we translate “do not concern” means “to go, come, walk; referring to a figurative mode of life, action, a particular path of one’s life”. When the Psalmist uses this expression, the Psalmist is telling us that the way of living, the path of life is one of humility.

So we are immediately presented with a description of how the Christian believer is to live their life: not proud or haughty but humble. It should be no surprise though that throughout time and across cultures, we have tended to interpret pride and humility in one of two extreme ways. This is just as noticeable in the life of the believer as in the life of the non-believer. There are two extreme ways we think about pride and humility; there are two extreme postures we take and practices we do in terms of arrogance and humility. First, we tend to regard ourselves too highly. We think too much of ourselves, calling it pride. Or, secondly, we tend to regard ourselves too insignificantly. We think too little of ourselves, calling it humility.

The first perspective, the perspective which positions ourselves too highly, is a very real danger for the Christian believer living in the 21st century in Canada. All around us we hear echoes and nuances of the same message: be your own god. This message comes to us in phrases and ideologies like “do whatever you want as long as you’re not hurting anyone”; “pursue your own dreams and your own goals”; “do whatever makes you happy”. We use words like ambition or goals or dreams to hide the underlying reality of our North American cultural perspective. Here in Canada, we have adopted a way of living that no longer finds joy in discovering first who God is and who we are in relationship to our Creator. We choose a way of living that is all about finding out who I am, not who God is. We have embraced a lifestyle that denies that the fullness

and beauty and goodness of human life happens when we live in accordance with God's design for humanity. Instead, culture expects that we will each become our own god. We do this by making and following our own ambitions, goals, and dreams. We do this by me choosing and deciding what is in my best interest to flourish as a human being.

By me deciding my own path in life, I am thinking too highly of myself. I think I know everything. I think I know what's best for me. I think I know what will make me the happiest. In a word, this is pride. Pride says I don't need God, I'll be my own god. Pride says I can do this on my own and don't need a Saviour, a protector, a provider, a sustainer. Pride says I'll go about my own affairs in the way I want without surrendering or submitting to the character and will of God. Pride says I'll develop my own set of ethics and morals based on what I perceive to be right or wrong.

This popular approach to living has become increasingly clearer to me in my conversations with friends about some of the decisions Michael and I have made while we are dating. Michael and I have chosen God first and are seeking to live out of this fundamental identity and understanding of how God has designed human beings to flourish. Some of the decisions we have made create confusion and bewilderment for some friends because our decisions come from a place where God is first and we are second. Yet I firmly believe that the most fulfilling and joyous life is one that is lived in relationship with the Triune God and out of an understanding of how God has created and designed humans and human society to flourish. My choices are often strange to the world. They are strange because of this first perspective which encourages people to regard themselves as gods, more highly than they ought, rather than trusting God.

And so it can be very difficult for us to see, name and identify pride as a sin because our culture tends to hold pride as a virtue, something that is rewarded, something that is desired, something that is profitable, something that is an achievement. Pride has become the measure of success – to the degree a person has become their own god and follows their own dreams, that person has attained success.

But to the Christian, this is the complete opposite of what is Biblical. The Bible describes the most basic of sins – the original sin in the garden of Eden, the original sin of Adam and Eve, the original sin that started all creation on a path of brokenness and alienation and suffering. It is the sin called pride.

So the first perspective is the danger of thinking too much of ourselves. The second extreme perspective, which is just as real and concerning for the Christian believer living in Canada in the 21st century, is thinking too little of ourselves. At a recent Friday night youth group, the devotion and conversation had to do with how Christians handle bullying. With genuine concern and curiosity, one youth asked “so are we just supposed to be a doormat for people to walk over?”. At first hearing of the question, it appears the youth is wrestling in understanding how to relate to others, especially those who are bullies or those who create problems for others. But I think that at a deeper level, the youth – in fact all of us - are wrestling in understanding our relationship to God. We are trying to figure out how to relate to God – God who is on high and who created us in His image.

No doubt you and I can recall moments in our faith journey where we moved to one of the two extremes. Sometimes there have been times where we have been proud or arrogant, choosing to be our own god. When we are faced with obstacles, we gather all our energy and strength and courage and take things into our own hands. We say to God “I don’t really need you because I’ll do this one on my own. Thanks, but I can take care of it myself.” But sometimes there are times where we desperately cling to God, crying out for him. When troubles of a different kind happen, instead of facing the challenges, we turn and run away in fear and panic. We cling to God, immobilized, panicked and overwhelmed. We pray and hope that God will do something so we don’t need to think or do anything.

I believe these two extreme positions or postures – the one where we think too highly of ourselves and the one where we think too little of ourselves – is not primarily about how we view ourselves, it’s not about our self-worth or self-identity. For the Christian, pride isn’t primarily about regarding myself as more than I am, it’s about reducing God to nothing. The position where we think too little of ourselves isn’t primarily about having low self-worth or self-esteem; it’s about turning God into something He is not.

So I think these two extreme positions are born from an improper understanding of our relationship with God. The Psalmist articulates in the second verse the appropriate way for the Christian disciple to understand our relationship with God. The Psalmist writes:

But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

The image the Psalmist uses to describe our relationship with God the Father is that of a young child who has been weaned from their mother. The image the Psalmist uses to explain humility is the image of a weaned child. What does this image teach us about our relationship with God the Father in Heaven? What does this image teach us about humility?

Well, let's consider the image of a weaned child in contrast to the image of a breastfeeding infant. When a child is born, that infant is completely and utterly and totally dependent on their parent(s), especially their mother if the infant is breast-fed. Parents know this well, due to sleepless nights and constant attention needed for the little one, which demands that new parents rework their schedule around the life of the newborn. Parents are regularly reminded of their infant's dependency through the cries, screams, and wails that come from the child. The infant clings desperately to the comfort and tender embrace of their mother or father.

Last week, I was in Vancouver for my ordination preparation with CBWC. Since I had lived in Vancouver for 6.5 years before moving here, I still have a number of friends who live in the Vancouver area and was able to meet up with some of them in between CBWC work. Two of my friends recently had babies, one is 5 months old and the other baby is almost two months old. Now I understand that each child is unique, with different personalities and needs. Nevertheless, I observed how these little ones found complete security in their mother. I could not comfort and provide for the babies in the same way their mother could. Whether happy or sad, content or afraid, secure or insecure, the infant clings to their parents. Using imagery from the Psalm, the infant finds solace and comfort from their mother's breast.

But the Psalmist uses the image of a weaned child in relationship to their mother to describe our relationship with God; to describe humility. What is the difference between the weaned child and the breastfeeding child? As the child grows from infant to a weaned child, the child grows in their relationship to their parent. The relationship grows from one where the baby regards the mother based on how the mother can satisfy and fulfill the baby's real and important needs to one where the child, now older, willingly chooses to be with the mother not because the mother will provide and meet all the child's needs but because the child is simply content to be with the mother for who she is.

This I also observed recently. About a month ago, I was babysitting my friends' children here in Whitehorse while my friends were on vacation in Hawai'i. They have two children: a 5 year old and a 2 year old. The two year old is quite different from the two month old I visited in Vancouver. The two year old didn't need me in the same way the two month old needs their mother. The two year old came running to me and gave me a big hug when I picked her up from daycare not because she was hungry and I had food but simply because she was delighted to see me and go home and play with me. The weaned child takes delight in their parents not because of how their parents satisfy their needs but because of who their parents are. So this image teaches us a few things about our relationship with God.

First, it teaches us that our Christian faith is like childlike trust rather than infantile dependency. When we learn to trust God, then we can more fully discover our identity in Christ, an identity given by God. The Biblical image of our relationship to God is that of a child and parent. Jesus says in the gospel of Matthew *"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little*

children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” And so the image of child and parent reminds us that our relationship to God is built on trust. It is the willingness of the disciple to trust God the Father, the willingness of the disciple to be led by God the Holy Spirit, the willingness of the disciple to be saved by God the Son, the willingness of the disciple to be taught by God the Holy Spirit, the willingness of the disciple to be loved by God the Judge, the willingness of the disciple to be made new by God the Redeemer, a willingness of the disciple to be blessed by the Triune God.

And since it is the disciple’s willingness to trust God, it means Christian discipleship is not about mindless doing, mindless worship, mindless obedience, mindless praying, mindless service. No, instead we are free to choose to receive his Word, his gifts, his love, his grace, free to choose to walk with God, to rest with God, to obey His teaching and commands, free to willingly and joyously serve the church and the community. With childlike trust, we come to God freely in faith and in love, rather than having infantile dependency that clings to God in fear or panic or insecurity.

Second, it teaches us that our Christian faith is one where we are freely able to choose to go to God because we love God and desire to simply rest or abide in Him without a desperate clinginess to God. Just as the weaned child grows from desiring their mother for fulfillment of their own needs to enjoying the presence of their mother, the Christian disciple grows from desiring God for fulfillment of one’s own needs and desires God for who God is. The shift in perspective and practice happens when the disciple moves away from being absorbed by their own needs and desires and begins to rest in God.

We see the same growth or attitude in healthy spousal relationships. A wife does not cling to her husband out of fear or panic or insecurity or dependency but draws near to her husband in faith and in love. In the same way, the husband does not cling to his wife out of fear or panic or insecurity or pride but draws near to his wife in love and in faith.

Third, the movement and growth from a sucking infant to a weaned child is not easy or smooth. It is boisterous, messy, loud, frustrating, hard, and demanding. To move from a stage of dependence to a stage of trust is truly a battle of wills. As an infant becomes weaned, the infant is suddenly faced with a profound experience of sorrow and distress, expressed no doubt through sulking, sobbing, and struggling. But here's the fascinating part I have learned in my observations of young infants and their parents. Though having been denied the comfort of the mother's breast, the weaned child still finds comfort in the mother. Even though the mother refused the demands of her child, knowing this was best for the child's growth, the child still finds comfort in the mother. In our Christian walk, as we grow from infantile dependency on God to childlike trust, we experience growth when we no longer demand the joys and needs from God we once believed were essential. Instead we experience comfort and rest and solace in the One who denied such needs.

So in this Psalm, we see how rather than attempting to become their own god, rather than assuming responsibility for everyone and everything, rather than pursuing one's own ambitions, the Psalmist instead has cultivated a different sort of aspiration. The Psalmist aspires to learn how to be at home with God. The Psalmist aspires to learn and discover who God is and how to live faithfully as a Christian disciple. The Psalmist has learned that a life well lived is a life that

is in keeping with the realities of who God is and our identity in that relationship. The Psalmist has learned to trust that God created us, that God loves us, that God is redeeming us, that God provides for us, that God judges righteously, that God brings us to complete maturity.

The Psalmist sums it up this way

O Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore.

The Hebrew word for “hope” means to wait, to await, to wait expectantly, to have hope. This is what humility means. It means to choose to be with God, to respond to him, to trust him, to rest and abide in God.

This text is particularly applicable for me. As you know, I was in Vancouver for my ordination preparation week with CBWC at the end of January. Part of our time was spent doing a mock ordination examining council wherein each of the nine candidates was asked questions based on our ordination theological paper for about 45 minutes from CBWC staff and other candidates. We also spent many hours talking about matters and issues relevant for pastoral ministry and working with CBWC. Several times, our conversations moved to discussions about servant leadership. As we reflected on servant leadership, as modeled by Jesus Christ, and as outlined in the Scriptures, we kept circling around to one word: humility. So as I am in the process of working towards ordination, I keep asking myself what humility looks like, both in my vocation as a pastor and in the more general identity of being a follower of Jesus Christ - as someone who has friendships with Christians and non-Christians, as someone who is dating a Christian, as someone who lives and works and plays in this community.

This Psalm is an important reminder to me, as I hope it is for you, of what humility looks like. It is about trusting God. It is not about thinking too highly of myself. It is not about thinking too low of myself. It is about finding comfort and rest in God because of who God is, not because of what God does to satisfy my needs.

So this is what the Christian pilgrimage is all about: growth from infantile faith to maturity. Growth from pride, growth from utter dependency to humility, to trust, to faith that responds to God out of our love, like the weaned child in its mother's embrace.

If you reflect on your own Christian faith, I am sure you would agree that you feel differently today than when you first believed in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour and became a Christian. Those intense and immense feelings waned and changed and you may have wondered if indeed you were still a Christian because you no longer felt the same as you did when you first became a Christian. This is the feeling of growing up in Christ, the feeling of being weaned, the feeling of moving from a place of dependency to a place of willingness to trust. It is the feeling of becoming humble because Christian discipleship is about humility.