

Looking in Exalted Humility

St. Luke begins our Gospel lesson for this morning by telling us upfront that when Jesus came to dine with Pharisees on a particular Sabbath day, the Pharisees were “*watching Him carefully.*” Based on the context, we know *why* they were watching Jesus so intently. We understand that they were looking with very *sinful intent*. They didn’t look to Jesus in the humility of faith. They were only looking at Him so carefully and intently because they hoped they could catch Him in a Sabbath sin. It’s not difficult to see the sinfulness and wickedness in these proud and arrogant fools, is it? It makes perfect sense to our ears that Jesus would respond to such arrogance by teaching about sinful pride being brought low and humiliated, while all those who are humble in the faith will be exalted. We look to the Pharisees, and we immediately see how they fit into Jesus’ lesson. There’s no mystery here.

But...what about the reflection in our mirror? What about our sinful pride and arrogance? What about our lack of faithful humility? Now, I know that such questions will not sit well with some of you. After all, you’re not like the Pharisees! You don’t look to your works to save you. You don’t look to the Law for your salvation. *You look to Christ and to Christ alone.* You know...I’m not going to disagree with you. I know everyone here firmly believes and confesses the Scriptural Truth that we are saved through faith alone in God’s grace alone, which He unconditionally bestows upon us because of Christ alone. However, the issue raised by these readings today isn’t necessarily grounded in the false doctrine of works-righteousness; that is, looking to our works for salvation (like the Pharisees). Rather, the issue set before us today for meditation is the issue of *humility and exaltation* (although I will add that when you get down to it, works-righteousness really is at the core of a sinful pride and lack of humility, and we’re all guilty).

When we look for peace, for comfort, for confidence and assurance, to what/whom are we looking? I know the “right answer” and so do you. But...do we look to Christ in the humility of repentant faith, or do we look with a *glimmer of sinful exaltation and pride* in our eyes? The devil isn’t dumb. He knows he can’t get us to completely take our eyes off Jesus and look to our works for our salvation. That would be works-righteousness! “*Get behind me Satan!*” This is why he uses a different tact. Rather than try the glaringly obvious frontal assault of works-righteousness, he comes to us stealthily, under the guise of “humility.” He doesn’t give a different word. He just gently twists and corrupts what God has already said.

Case in point: We hear Jesus say, “*He who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted,*” and our *default, knee-jerk response*

is, “*Okay, here’s what I need to do. I don’t want to be like those idiot Pharisees. (Notice how we tear them down and exalt ourselves.) I need to humble myself so that I can be exalted.*” ***Sounds a bit works-righteous, don’t you think?*** And from there we go about working very hard to humble ourselves. We volunteer. We sacrifice our time, our talents, and our treasures. We want to be exalted, so we need to work hard at such humble tasks. **Understand: Doing these sorts of things isn’t the problem.** The problem arises when we make sure to let everyone else know that we’re doing them. It’s when we make sure everyone else knows how “humble” we are that the devil rejoices. He fans such “humility” into sinful flame.

For instance, we make sure we have plenty of pictures on Facebook of our “humble generosity and volunteerism.” Everyone needs to know. We make sure to periodically check throughout the day to see how many people “like” our “humility.” ***We take great pride in all those “thumbs up.”*** We make sure our “humility” is highlighted in the newsletter. We make sure our “humility” is properly accounted for and reimbursed. After all, we’re not humble for free! Our right hand shouldn’t even know what our left hand is doing, but we make sure that the IRS and the treasurer know. We make sure everyone within earshot knows that we did this, that, or the other thing. ***“Look at me! Behold how humble I am!”*** And if we don’t get acknowledged/thanked (aka “exalted/praised”) for our “humility”? Same thing. Everyone will know about it...***in the most humble, “bless your heart” kind of way, of course.*** Chances are, we’ll be sure to not be so “humble” next time. You don’t scratch my humble back, then I won’t scratch yours.

Sadly, this type of prideful false humility even creeps in when it comes to something as holy as worship in the Divine Service. We take careful note of who’s not here. Thank God we’re not like them, right? We take note of what people are wearing. We take note of how people are behaving, whether they’re singing or listening or messing around on their phone or gabbing with their neighbor about where they’re gonna go for lunch. We measure ourselves against such things, ***and we take great pride in our “humble faithfulness” that we’re not like those people.*** Even at the rail this sort of “humility” rears its ugly head. Who are the “better” Christians? Who takes the individual cup and who takes the common cup? Who receives the host in their hand and who receives it on their tongue? Who kneels? Who stands? Who bows and who just bellies up to the bar? It’s all so terribly ironic. We tear down our own brothers and sisters of the faith in order to exalt ourselves and highlight our “humility”...to God!

We even dare to take issue with God when our “humbleness” isn’t exalted and rewarded the way we think it ought to be. We experience a little “cross bearing” in life, and we look to God with a bit of incredulity in our eyes. ***“Really?! I do all this for you, and this is how you treat me? Don’t I deserve***

better...at least better than those other people who aren't nearly as humble and faithful as I am?"

Let's play that game. **What do you deserve?** Look into the mirror of God's Word. What do you see? If you're honest, through faith, you will see a corpse of sin staring back at you. *That's it.* You will see someone ***totally and utterly incapable*** of paying the wage for even of those sins, let alone a life full of sin, beginning at the point of conception. It's this reality that causes the wisdom of faith to fall flat on its face in ***repentant humility and shame*** and cry out to God for mercy. And notice: I haven't even mentioned the other sinners in our lives. Jesus died for them too, but we know the true depth and depravity of our own sin. ***We don't dare hold ourselves up against anyone else.*** We know our own sinful truth. Nobody is the transparent "open book" they think they are. We all have sins and skeletons that we hope no one ever finds out about...***including God.*** In true humility, we look to this holy Law of God and we see God's just and righteous Truth. We confess; that is, we agree with God. We say the same thing He says. We say the same thing because, in faith, we see the same thing He does. We see what His Law reveals to us when we look in its mirror. We see the chief of sinners staring back at us. *"Lord, have mercy!"* ***This is what it rightly means to "humble one's self."***

And this is when the Holy Spirit, in all divine mercy and grace, directs us to look, not inward; not to ourselves, our works (or even our hearts), ***but to God Himself in the flesh,*** bloodied and battered as He is nailed to a criminal's cross. Look at Christ! Look at this cross! God loved you so much that He died for you! Your sins are so great that God Himself had to go to the cross in order to make atonement for them! That's the **ONLY** way your sin could be atoned for. Folks: How can this not humble you?!

Look to your baptism. Look to this altar/this rail. Listen to the words of peace and absolution He speaks to you in your hearing. These are rather "humble" and unimpressive means, to be sure. By all worldly standards, there isn't a whole lot to get excited over. Many people and many places offer a much bigger/better show and a bigger/better buzz. In fact, it's sad, but even many very faithful Christians miss it. We get so busy looking for exaltation in the ***heavenly future tense*** that we fail to recognize our exaltation **right here and now.** Here is Christ! Talk about being exalted! The Lord of all Heaven and Earth comes to you—right here and right now—in order to feed you and nourish you with His grace. That's how much He loves you. He comes to you this day, in spite of you! He comes to you in order to pour out His rich and abundant blessings of grace upon you, not because you deserve it, but because He loves you. None of this is because you've earned it! This is ALL God's grace and love for you. ***How can this not humble you? How can you not exalt in this—God's grace and love for you?***

And that's how we'll end for today, not with prescription, but with description. Look here. Look to Christ. Look to this cross. Here [the crucifix] is God's just and righteous wrath against sin...your sin. Here is God's incomprehensible love and grace for you. Jesus Christ—God in the flesh—willingly humiliated Himself unto death...for you. St. Paul says it best. *“Being found in human form, He [Jesus] humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* God so loved you (and the entire world) that He sent His only-begotten Son to willingly suffer such humiliation, all so that you could be exalted, no longer an exiled corpse of sin, but one who has now, through baptism, been exalted and adopted into His heavenly household and made co-heir with Him of everlasting life.

And your Father continues to send His Son to you. God didn't just send His Son in the past out Fatherly love and compassion. He sends His Son to you *even now* as you walk through this shadowy valley of death we so foolishly call “life.” That's how much He loves you. Christ *continues* to lower Himself down to you; right where you're at, right here and right now. This is where heaven meets earth; where eternity meets temporality. In true unconditional love, grace, and mercy He continues to bring His exalted glorious self to your humble self in order to exalt you and raise you up in His hope, His love, and His peace that surpasses all understanding.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Here is your exaltation. Here is your boast. May this, in faith, be your humble exaltation, now and into all eternity.

In His most holy and exalted name
(the same name put upon you in Baptism)...

AMEN