



REAL: AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN A WORLD OF COUNTERFEITS

Humility: Brokenhearted Joy

Luke 7:36-50

February 5, 2012

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One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.³⁷ And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment,³⁸ and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."⁴⁰ And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"⁴³ Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet.⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."⁴⁸ And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."⁴⁹ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Introduction

Today marks an important transition in our *Real* series. We're trying to get our hands around what is authentic Christianity because we recognize that we live in a world of counterfeit Christianities. We therefore began this series by tuning our ears to Jesus' blunt call to *get real*. For Jesus, getting real—with God, yourself, others—really matters.

The last three weeks, we've grappled with how to become real. And the answer we get from Jesus and find in Scripture is this: you become real by being converted. God makes you real by

giving you a new heart, new birth, and new sight. He turns you into something new; you're no longer the person you once were. You've become a new creation by the sovereign grace of God.

Now, we're prepared to transition from becoming real to *being real*. We're ready to move from the question, "How do you *become* real?" to the question "What does it mean to *be* real?" What does a real Christian look like? How would you know a real Christian from a not-real Christian? What does authentic Christianity look like? How is it different from its counterfeits? Or can you even tell a difference?

For the next several weeks, then, we're going to look at what the Bible has to say about the *marks* or *signs* of authentic Christianity. These are qualities of the heart and characteristics of a life—signs that you're truly born again. Understand, however, that these marks are intended to provide us with a profile of a real Christian; they are not intended to give you scorecard for easily spotting real Christians.

The first mark of a real Christian we want to look at is this: *Humility*. This is the first mark because as every seasoned Christian recognizes, humility is absolutely essential to real Christianity. When asked what the first thing in Christianity is, Augustine said this: the first, second, and third thing is this: humility. Without real humility, you're not real!

Humility: Misconceptions

But humility is one of those easily misunderstood Christian virtues, isn't it. We often mistake imitations of humility for the real deal. Sometimes we equate a certain personality type with genuine humility. You know the type: passive, quiet, introverted—a real Mr. Milquetoast. Or you may think a person is humble if he is riddled with self-doubt or makes self-deprecating comments; if he is, in C. S. Lewis words, "a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody."¹

Sometimes we equate genuine humility with thinking as badly about yourself as possible. We'll only be humble if we can somehow manage a massive downward adjustment in the way we think about ourselves. When you read certain Christian authors on this topic, that's the impression you get. But I don't think that's entirely accurate to what we find in the Bible.

A Picture of Humility: The Woman's Brokenhearted Joy

If we want a more accurate picture of genuine humility, we need to look at the account we find in Luke's Gospel. There we see humility depicted in a life, rather than defined with words. We have a picture of humility—what it looks like in action, how humility is embodied in a person.

Here's the scene: Jesus and some others are invited to a dinner party hosted by a Pharisee named Simon. We're not told anything more about the meal or the conversation. Instead, the story immediately directs our attention to this picture of humility: "a woman of the city, who was a sinner" (v. 37). She heard Jesus was coming to this man's house, so she somehow broke in on the party to get near the Savior. She brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment. And in

¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.99.

this woman we see our picture of humility: the picture of *brokenhearted joy*—“and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with ointment” (v. 38).

You know, people often confuse grief and tears for real humility. Of course, it’s true that the crushing weight of our circumstances or the guilt of our own sin can create a sense of brokenness. And you thus find yourself distraught, at the end of your rope, crying out for help. This experience may be the beginning of real humility, but it’s not humility itself. This is what the Bible calls “worldly grief” (2 Cor. 7:10). And it’s often mistaken for real humility.

True humility, however, is borne in the heart of a person who knows he has a huge debt to pay because of sin. He knows he’s entirely bankrupt, morally and spiritually. And this breaks him in the core of who he is. And yet brokenness isn’t humility until it’s permeated with joy—the joy of knowing that the crushing weight of sin has been lifted, that the impossible debt you owed is fully paid. Real humility only begins when you hear Jesus say to you, as he said to this sinful woman, “Your sins are forgiven” (v. 48).

Real humility isn’t created in our hearts fundamentally by seeing God’s greatness against our littleness. Instead, it comes from seeing God’s *goodness* against our *sinfulness*. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:23-25). “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7-8). When you see the Savior lifting your impossible burden, then and only then is real humility borne in your heart.

A Picture of Pride: The Pharisee’s Smug Self—Satisfaction

Pride, on the other hand, has little or no appreciation for the debt that’s owed. We have a picture of pride in Simon the Pharisee. He invites Jesus to his house for a meal and, frankly, is taken aback by what he sees; he’s stunned not so much by the woman’s actions as he is by Jesus’ actions!

From his standpoint, there are nearly a half-dozen problems with this picture. First, this is his house, not hers. It’s a dinner party for an important guest, not a time for needy people to intrude on the event. Jesus is a recognized rabbi, not a local pub owner, and rabbis do not kibitz with sinners. She’s obviously a woman, and he’s obviously a man, which means she shouldn’t touch him, not even his feet. Worst of all, she’s a recognized sinner! No wonder then, the Pharisee gasps when he sees how Jesus responds to her. And, notice: his real beef isn’t with her but with him. So he mutters under his breathe, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known *who* and *what sort* of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner” (v. 39).

In this single sentence, we see the polar opposite of humility, right into the heart of pride. Pride says this: I won’t love you, or I don’t even need to love you because of who you are, or because of what sort of person you are. Pride impedes the flow of love because it’s always taking into account what social stature someone holds: Who are they? How do they rank in the world? Which rung do they occupy on the social ladder? This is why pride can be so blinding and thus so damaging to love.

And yet, here's the tricky thing about pride. It can get all dressed up in fancy clothes and look an awful lot like real humility—especially among religious people. If you look to the billions of people in the world's other religions, you will often see this kind of counterfeit humility. It is the humbling sort of suffering that comes from self-denial, either denying some physical comfort or pleasure, or denying some form of glory or recognition. This is a kind of self-imposed asceticism that certainly looks on the surface like real humility. But it's not the real thing; it's only a counterfeit, a very sophisticated and subtle counterfeit. Even more difficult to distinguish from genuine humility is what the Apostle Paul calls "false humility" (Col 2:18 NIV). This other is an even more subtle and deceptive counterfeit of humility.

Paul sees this kind of "false humility" (2:18 NIV) among the Christians in Colossae. They're submitting themselves to all sorts of stringent restrictions in matters of food and drink, as well as religious practices of worship. But, as he says, all this severity to the body may appear humble, but it's only "promoting self-made religion," which has "no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh" (2:23). So, too, Jesus see this kind of false humility among the Pharisees who when they fast, as he says, put on a gloomy and disfigured face as they engage in heroic religious acts of self-denial, mainly designed to impress the less spiritually committed. But our Lord sees right through this veneer of false humility; what he sees is a heart actually seething with self-righteousness and pride.

Humility Clears the Way for Love to Flow Freely

You see, real humility in your heart-brokenhearted joy clears the way for love to flow freely and fully, first to the Savior and then to other people. The soul of the truly humble person is like the woman's alabaster jar of ointment, which is broken because of sin and yet poured out in love all over the Savior because of his free offer of forgiveness.

Pride, on the other hand, is the huge roadblock to love, whether loving God or loving others. For the proud heart isn't a broken heart but a bottled-up heart out of which love cannot truly flow. The proud person, like Simon the Pharisee, is always assessing everyone's standing, including his own, vis-à-vis everyone else. Like Simon the Pharisee, pride is always asking who and what sort of person it is dealing with, what sort of accomplishments or education or beauty or wealth or power or influence or popularity or position or status or authority. And it only loves if it's the right sort of person it deems worthy of love.

The brokenhearted joy of humility, however, doesn't claim special prerogatives for itself, or cling to one's rights or status or position or authority. Rather than getting eaten up by rivalry and conceit, or envying and jockeying for pride-of-place, humility enables you to "count others more significant than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3). And this is the very heart of love.

The Pathway to Humility in Several Steps

The world we live in, however, doesn't really encourage us to walk in humility. Just think about it. Our whole economic system, free market capitalism, feeds on competition: getting ahead and beating the other guy. Politics these days seems to be predicated on asserting one's rights, usually over against other people. As a culture we're increasingly characterized by fear and self-protection, which tends only to put roadblocks in the way of loving others as we would want to be loved. And, of course, ours is a society that specializes in self-promotion, from pursuing the American Dream and attaining your goals, to putting me first and being all you

can be—none of which is particularly helpful at putting to death pride or selfish ambition and vain conceit.

And yet, in the midst of this swirl of pride and ambition and conceit around us and so often within us, the Lord Jesus Christ says to us: “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4). Or we hear the prophet Zephaniah cry out: “seek humility” (Zeph. 2:3). Or we read in First Peter that we’re to “humble yourselves” (1 Pet. 5:6). Or we hear James, the brother of Jesus, challenge us: “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). Or we see the Apostle Paul simply say: “put on...humility” (Col. 3:12).

But how do we do that? Putting on humility isn’t as easy as putting on a winter coat. If only it were, but it’s not. There are, however, a few steps you can take, if you want to put on humility, real humility.

The first step is to acknowledge—indeed, admit, and confess even— that when it comes to humility, you’re not where you need to be. We need to remember how prone we are to pride, each and every one of us. “’Tis inexpressible, and almost inconceivable, how strong a self-righteous, self-exalting disposition is naturally in man; and what he will not do and suffer, to feed and gratify it.”² This is why C. S. Lewis offered this very simple and yet sage piece of advice. “If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”³

The second step is to recognize how great the debt of your sin is. Though you and I are only finite creatures, yet because of our sin, we bear infinite guilt before an infinite and holy God; and thus we owe God—each and every one of us—an infinite debt. Even if we had just one sin, it would take us an eternity to payback the debt we owed.

The third step, however, is to realize how free is the gift that Jesus Christ gives. The sinless Savior stands ready to receive you. He’s paid the infinite price by shedding his own blood on the cross, dying in your stead. And now he stands ready to forgive you. You must only look to him by faith, as the sinful woman did, and let him say to you, as he said to her: “Your sins are forgiven.”

There’s a fourth step toward humility, which is to ask for humility. Pray for it. But be careful if you do this, because God may do some counterintuitive things in your life to give you the gift of humility. He may lead you through the wilderness for forty years, like he did the Israelites, “that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart” (Deut. 8:2). Or he may send you a “thorn in the flesh,” like he did for the Apostle Paul, even though Paul pleaded with the Lord again and again to remove it from him. But it didn’t happen. Why? To keep him from becoming conceited, to keep him humble and dependent, relying not upon his own strength but the strength of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

There’s a fifth and very simple step you can take toward humility. You can stop taking credit for the good things in your life, and instead, start giving God all the credit for everything. “What

² Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 315.

³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 99.

do you have that you did not receive?” the Apostle Paul asks the cocksure Corinthians at one point. “If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Many of us, however, would prefer to play King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who one day went out on the roof of the royal palace and said: “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” (Daniel 4:30). But the way to humility is to learn to be more like King David, who says this: “Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?...Therefore you are great, O LORD God. For there is none like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears (2 Samuel 7:18, 22).

Don’t take any credit for getting saved, if indeed you’re saved. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). There’s no shame in ascribing your salvation entirely to God. Let him get all the credit, both for providing you the way of salvation, and for giving you the gift of faith, so you can lay hold of this salvation.

There’s a sixth step: set your hope fully on your future exaltation. Yes, that’s right. Hope fully in the fact that you will one day be exalted. If humility is going to be true humility, it must flow from faith. Which means you must treasure some promise of God and let your confidence in that promise fuel your humility. But what promise does Scripture consistently give us, encouraging us to walk humbly before God and others? “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you” (1 Pet. 5:6; cf. 3:8).

Or listen to this remarkable promise from the Lord Jesus, one he repeats often in the Gospels: “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12; cf. Luke 14:11; 18:14; Matt. 18:4; 21:5). Jesus, you see, is not averse to sharing his glory with you; he plans to exalt you—if you will humble yourself in this life and meet the needs of others. If you refuse this stunning promise of future glory and exaltation, then you will be humbled to the dust, and below the dust—forever and ever.

And, finally, a seventh step toward humility: gaze intently at the Savior’s humble sacrifice for you. As someone has wisely said, “The only hope of a decreasing self is an increasing Christ.” You see, nothing in all the world is better designed to produce humility in our hearts than the salvation we find in Jesus Christ and his cross. Indeed, everything about the gospel serves to magnify God because of his grace, and abase us because of our sin. When we’re struck with the reality of our own sin and the wonder of God’s mercy in Christ, then and only then will we find our hearts becoming truly humble. Gazing intently at Jesus Christ is the key to humility.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, invites each of us to come unto him, kneel at his feet, and like the sinful woman, wet his feet with our tears. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29). We only need to acknowledge our need of his mercy; believe he has purchased forgiveness for us on the cross; and come to him in repentance and faith.

And as we come to him, we will learn from him—we’ll learn the way of humility. He invites us to follow him along the path of discipleship, which is a lowly, brokenhearted road, but one filled with deep and abiding joy and rest.

O may we exult, then, in brokenhearted joy! And may we find ourselves glad to be at the feet of our gracious and humble Savior, and there to marvel at his wondrous mercy, until one day we're ushered into his presence, where there will be no longer any place for pride, where humility will be the only reasonable and indeed only satisfying response.

Amen and Amen!

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