

AMAZING GRACE – Part 15

'Humility – The Open Door to Grace'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In Romans 1:16 the Apostle Paul affirms that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes and it's not limited to the initial act of conversion. It is ongoing and includes healing, deliverance, fullness of life and abundant grace – the empowering presence of God, enabling you to be all that you can be and to do all that you can do. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God, bearing fruit and expanding throughout the world whenever God's people hear and understand grace.

Colossians 1:6 *"All over the world this Gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth."*

As sincere Christians we want the gospel to bear fruit and to grow in and among and through us into our community. We want to minister in the empowering presence of God. Therefore, we seek to understand grace in all its truth and that's why we need to hear about grace over and over again because a fuller understanding of grace will empower us to be all that God created us to be. We should note that both the Old and New Testaments make a connection between our attitude and God's grace.

Proverbs 3:34 *"God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

So if we want to participate more in the grace of God, then we need to seek an understanding of the relationship between grace and humility. Let's look at some more texts.

2 Samuel 22:28 *"You save the humble, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low."*

2 Chronicles 7:14 *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

Daniel 10:12 *"Then he continued (the messenger from the Lord), "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them."*

1 Peter 5:5-7 *"Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."*

It appears that humility in us is the open door to God's grace - to God's empowering presence in our lives and in the life of the Church. The word humility has a number of definitions, concepts and feelings which attach to it that are mostly negative, so we're not too sure if we want humility or not. We'll give lip service to it, but deep down we don't think it's that inviting. Not many people want to pray: *'God, grant me humility?'* The reason is because the images that come to mind about humility are not that attractive. However those are not biblical images - they have evolved in our western language and culture.

When you have an accurate understanding of humility, you are going to be crying out to God from the depth of your being for humility, for there's nothing negative about it. It's all profoundly positive. Let's start off with some standard dictionary definitions of humility:

(1) *poor, wretched and pitiful.* We speak of humble circumstances. We wouldn't ever pray for poverty or wish it on anybody.

(2) *servile, cringing and shameful, the attitude of a slave.* That is certainly not attractive. God's grace has set us free from such humiliation.

There are lots of prayers and worship songs that talk about the humility of Jesus. I can't imagine anyone praying, "*Jesus, I love your wretched and pitiful heart,*" we wouldn't sing, "*Jesus you are so cringing and servile.*" That hardly inspires worship, does it? These definitions, which are common in our usage, do not reflect the biblical concept of humility. Just as we had to re-define grace last week in order to unlock its real meaning and power and to be able to actually participate in it, so too, we must re-define humility.

A third definition of humility, which comes a lot closer to the Biblical definition is:

(3) *unpretentious, not demanding attention.*

Does that sound better? Don't you want to be around people like that? Of course you do. In the first place, we need to understand that God Himself is supremely humble. **Humility has absolutely nothing to do with status or class or rank. It only has to do with character.** God is God and He is Supreme and transcendent - yet God is humble. God deserves and welcomes our worship and praise and He does so without any embarrassment at all, yet He is not proud.

You can actually see this beautiful quality of humility within the three persons of the Trinity as they relate to each other. God the Father, points to the Son. The Father stays in heaven out of sight and sends His Son to earth and gives Him the leading role on centre stage, saying - "*Look here is My beloved Son.*" God the Son immediately points back to the Father and says: "*Without Him I can do nothing - I only do what I see the Father doing. I am here to do his bidding - all honour and glory goes to Him.*" The Holy Spirit hides altogether and takes the things that are Christ's and makes them known to us - bringing to our remembrance everything that Christ spoke. So there is this beautiful mutual deference and profound humility within the relationships between the Father, Son and Spirit.

Many people wonder why, when God came to seek and to save the lost, He didn't make a spectacular entrance for all the world to see His glory. He chose not to impress us with how great He is and how small and insignificant we are by comparison. He didn't make us pay attention. By contrast, He very quietly and almost secretly, came into our world through the womb of a young peasant girl. He did that because it is essential to His nature. He came to a barn because He is supremely humble - He doesn't push himself into Inns which have no room. The most amazing thing in this universe - God becoming man - happened in a barn full of smelly animals, because He is fundamentally humble. He came to invite us to respond voluntarily to Him, and then He died for us. He didn't just issue a divine decree and make it all happen, because that is not how God operates.

There is no play-acting with God, no performance, no spectacle. He operates according to who He is all the time, whether that makes sense to others or not. If you want to see who God is, just look at Jesus in the New Testament. Simply put: **God does, Who Jesus is - all the time.** The fullness of the deity was in Jesus which is why He said: "*If you've seen me you've seen the Father.*"

This could be the most winsome, wonderful and attractive aspect of God's character - His profound humility. It's a shame we don't talk about it more in Church because this is a powerful evangelistic tool. It's a powerful discipleship insight. Who wouldn't want to hang around with somebody like that? We love being with humble people. In many ways, true humility is reward enough in itself. If humility was the end goal, it would be a great thing to strive for, but you can add to this the fact that God grants *grace* to the humble. He actually gives His personal presence and power to the humble.

Now the opposite of humility is pride, and conversely, it is the most repulsive of all personal traits. We hate to be around people who are constantly drawing attention to themselves, dominating all conversations, demanding their rights, pushing their programs and ideas, insisting on their views, forcing people to hear about their problems all the time. You may end up having to buy something from somebody like that, but you definitely don't want to be around them!

You're in good company because God detests pride too. Over and over again the Bible tells us that God resists, mocks, curses, and thwarts the proud, but He gives grace to the humble. So if pride was not by itself curse enough on our lives, we have this added active resistance from God Himself. We all want to be delivered of pride and move on to humility – so how do we do that? True humility is rooted in security. A truly secure person is free to be humble. Let's hear from Paul again:

Philippians 2:5-11 *“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Philippians 2:5-11)

Jesus was able to humble Himself because He was totally, utterly secure. He knew who He was and He knew His Father's love. He had nothing to prove, nothing to hide, nothing to defend, nothing to lose and nothing to gain. He had everything of God, so He could humble Himself all the way to the point of death. (Read this paragraph again! Let it really sink in)

We see Jesus acting out this profound humility when He gets up from the table and washes the feet of his followers:

John 13:2-5 *“The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. (Notice this..) Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God . . .*

Jesus knew that He had all power, He knew where He came from, He knew where He was going. He had total freedom and complete control over everything - and He chose to be a servant.

... so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.”

The Bible tells us that Jesus was full of grace - because He was profoundly humble. Jesus had the full measure of God's empowering presence which enabled Him to be all that He was and to do all that He did. His ability to suffer in the garden and die on the cross was not just His strength of character. The beautiful humility of Jesus opened Him up to receive the all-sufficient grace that God the Father poured into Him. It is the love and acceptance of God that produces that kind of security.

Before Jesus even began His earthly ministry, the Father spoke at His Son's baptism and told the whole world that: *"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."* Jesus' constant fellowship with the Father through prayer enabled Him to maintain that unbroken sense of security because He experienced moment by moment the acceptance and love of His Father.

The essential place to start in building mature Christian character is not by doing something but by receiving God's love.

Here is true love - not that we loved and went out and were good Christians, but that God first loved us and enabled us to love by His empowering presence working in and through us. So the very first thing you need to do is sit down and bask in the Father's love. Open yourself up to His love - directly through worship and prayer and reading the Bible and indirectly through the ministry of the body of Christ - the Church. Find some regular way of experiencing God's love, because you simply won't have the foundation to move on to anything else if you don't.

If security produces humility, then it follows that pride is related to insecurity. Those people who are insecure often compensate by calling attention to themselves. They are trying to earn the love and favour of people. At the base of such dominating and dogmatic behaviour is often a genuine insecurity. Some express pride in terms of standing out above the crowd and doing things that make people notice them, while others express pride by exhibiting a false humility: *"Oh, it's nothing, don't mention it - it's just the Lord."*

Therefore, just as humility is produced by security which is rooted in acceptance, pride is produced by insecurity which is rooted in rejection.

After a time of being rejected and betrayed, people think they are forced to take care of themselves and they do this by asserting themselves through various manifestations of pride. A truly fascinating thing about pride is that it is self-perpetuating. It feeds itself. What do you feel like doing to proud, arrogant people? Rejecting them, right? You don't like being around such people - you feel like pushing them away from you. The response to that inevitable rejection is to feel even more insecure and so their behaviour becomes worse.

It is a common pattern that bad things tend to breed bad things and good things tend to breed good things. For example, if a husband is critical of his wife, she will back away because of the criticism. He becomes more critical of her because she's backing away from him, which pushes her further away, which pushes him further away. If that cycle is not identified and cut short, the marriage is doomed. In reverse, we can see that a man's unconditional acceptance and love of his wife produces a security in her and a response from her which draws her closer to him. This makes him even more secure to, in turn, love, respect and honour her, which gives her even greater confidence to love and honour him and there you have it: 'one flesh' - the closest thing to heaven on earth.

So instead of rejecting the prideful and arrogant, we should do what God does - He resists them. That is, we confront them and say: *"This is not good behaviour. This will drive you away from people - don't do this."* Secondly we affirm them and say: *"You're accepted despite your behaviour. You're loved whether you measure up or not."* Too many of us don't know how to confront destructive behaviour without rejecting the person, but it is something we can learn. Also, most of us don't know how to be confronted about our behaviour and still feel accepted - but we can learn that too!

In identifying rejection as a root cause of pride, I am not suggesting that the person has no responsibility because they were rejected by others. We are each responsible for the choices we make regardless of our life's story. Rejection becomes insecurity when we do not believe God when He has told us that we are valuable in His sight.

We choose to turn away from His display of love in Jesus on the cross, and therefore we reject His grace. Obviously God does not reject the proud, He accepts us all. So what does it mean that God *resists* the proud?

Pride, by definition, is living life on your own and in your own strength. Pride is really our attempt to be independent from God and God won't have anything to do with that. God resists that way of living because He does not want to be shut out of our lives. You can thank God that He is determined to resist anything that gets in the way of a close personal, dependent relationship with Him, because your life is never going to work the way you want it to outside that relationship.

God wants to get into your life and He can't do that when you're functioning in self-sufficient pride. God's deepest motive in resisting pride is because He wants to give Himself to us and be involved intimately in our lives. He wants us to be the best version of ourselves and that only happens when we voluntarily humble ourselves before Him and open ourselves up to Him. Humbling yourself is not grovelling on the ground, it is simply admitting that you can't make it work on your own and that you are totally dependent upon God and His grace, His empowering presence to achieve anything worthwhile. The Bible doesn't say to pray that God will humble you, it says humble yourself, then God will give you His grace, His empowering presence. The Apostle Peter said it clearly:

1 Peter 5:5-6 *"Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."*

If you humble yourselves now, maybe not instantaneously, but in God's time, He will lift you up. In the next verse Peter tells us how we can do this:

1 Peter 5:7 *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."*

God tells us how to grab pride by the throat and choke it to death. You take those things that make you feel insecure and bring anxiety and you cast them on the Lord. You give them to God. Cast your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. Meditate on this fact. God the Father cares about you and thinks about you constantly. He wants to give you His grace, His empowering presence but He needs you to open the door to His grace through your humility. He wants you to cast all your insecurities and anxiety upon Him so He can take them away.

If the experience of God's grace has had any effect in us, we will want to participate in it more and more. Western civilisation mostly has a negative view of humility, but we find that God Himself is supremely humble. He is not boastful or prideful in His attitude. Humility comes from security. Too often we define ourselves largely by other peoples' opinions and attitudes towards us but God gives us a picture of ourselves in Christ. He loves and accepts us and we are valuable in His sight. Therefore we are completely secure in Him. Out of that security, we can humble ourselves over and over again and through that humility we open the door to God's grace – to God's empowering presence in our lives. You can't jump a step - one leads to the other – there are no short cuts.

God gives grace to the humble and grief to the proud. Our pride deceives us and we try to live our lives in our own strength. We shut God out by our own choices, and turn away from Him. When we humble ourselves, when we admit that we need and desire Him, then we are open to receiving and responding to God's empowering presence.

How then shall we live? In humility, by His grace - for His glory!

1. Read through this week's sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture. Go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant to you. What single statement impacted you the most? How will that now change your life? Write down what you need to do to respond to God's truth today.

2. Ponder the following statements from this week's sermon. What practical implications could or should flow from each of these statements? If you ask "How then shall I live?" in light of each of these truths, what would be your answer?

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Humility has absolutely nothing to do with status or class or rank. It only has to do with character.

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