

## Sermon 98, With the Humble Is Wisdom, Proverbs 30:10-33

**Proposition:** Agur's humility leads him to observe the natural and moral world and to demand humility.

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- II. Humility's Observations, vv. 11-16
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    3. Knead Wrath, Get Strife

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we look together this evening at the remainder of Agur's oracle from God. The first section talked about how to gain knowledge. It meditated at greater length on the prologue's declaration that the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Now that he has talked about the origin of knowledge, Agur goes on to discuss one particular aspect of knowing God and His creation. That aspect goes by the name of humility. Humility is the common theme throughout this chapter: The chapter begins with a humble declaration of ignorance, and progresses through some amazed observations of nature (things that would never be noticed by an arrogant fool), finally winding up with a direct rebuke to those who foolishly exalt themselves. Thus, Agur shows us the humility of genuine knowledge. We have already read that with the humble is wisdom, and that is on full display in this penultimate section of Proverbs. In full humility, Agur shares the secret of knowledge and demands humble behavior from his listener.

## **I. Humility's First Demand: Honor Your Social Inferiors, v. 10**

And so he starts by mentioning a scenario in which you denounce a slave to his master. In our day, the equivalent would be calling corporate headquarters at United Airlines to complain about the behavior of the flunky at the airport check-in desk. Corporate has the power to ruin that person's life based on a single well-aimed complaint from you. Again, imagine that you call Starbucks headquarters and tell them that a young barista aimed a racial slur at you. You have nothing to lose by making such a call, but you have the opportunity to destroy that barista's career. Of course, in a slave-master relationship all of this is even more magnified than it is in the (already too asymmetrical) employer-employee relationships we see today. It's important to note that the verse is particularly talking about untrue accusations, though I think it applies with almost equal force to true ones. Don't exploit the power differential to get what you want! If you do, you're not humble. You're arrogant. Failure to honor your social inferiors by using your influence with their master or boss to get them disgraced is the kind of behavior that invites a curse on your head. And this is a curse that God will honor. He will hear their curse, which is a kind of prayer, and He will exact the consequences from you for your despicable behavior.

Do you honor your social inferiors? Are you afraid to use your power to harm those beneath you on the social scale? Or do you casually deploy that power whenever it suits you? Brothers and sisters, how you treat the flunky who's talking to you from a call center in India matters. How you interact with the cashier and the janitor matters. How you speak to and about your children and your employees matters. Arrogant fools will suffer their inferiors' curse if they don't pay attention to this, the first commandment of humility.

## **II. Humility's Observations, vv. 11-16**

Well, with that direct precept out of the way, Agur turns to the numerical sayings that are his hallmark. He has two numerical sayings in this section, and four more in the next. He loves observing and categorizing. Sometimes, of course, the point of the category is obvious. Other times he just seems to enjoy seeing what God has made. That is the joy of humility. You don't have to have an ulterior motive to enjoy creation when you're humble. You don't have to stand on your dignity. You can simply get down and allow the wonder of it all to overwhelm you.

What I'm saying isn't very clear; Chesterton put it all much better.

In a very entertaining work, over which we have roared in childhood, it is stated that a point has no parts and no magnitude. Humility is the luxurious art of reducing ourselves to a point, not to a small thing or a large one, but to a thing with no size at all, so that to it all the cosmic things are what they really are—of immeasurable stature. That the trees are high and the grasses short is a mere accident of our own foot-rules and our own stature. But to the spirit which has stripped off for a moment its own idle temporal standards the grass is an everlasting forest, with dragons for denizens; the stones of the road are as incredible mountains piled one upon the other; the dandelions are like gigantic bonfires illuminating the lands around; and the heath-bells on their stalks are like planets hung in heaven each higher than the other. Between one stake of a paling and another there are

new and terrible landscapes; here a desert, with nothing but one misshapen rock; here a miraculous forest, of which all the trees flower above the head with the hues of sunset; here, again, a sea full of monsters that Dante would not have dared to dream. These are the visions of him who, like the child in the fairy tales, is not afraid to become small. Meanwhile, the sage whose faith is in magnitude and ambition is, like a giant, becoming larger and larger, which only means that the stars are becoming smaller and smaller. World after world falls from him into insignificance; the whole passionate and intricate life of common things becomes as lost to him as is the life of the infusoria to a man without a microscope. He rises always through desolate eternities. He may find new systems, and forget them; he may discover fresh universes, and learn to despise them. But the towering and tropical vision of things as they really are—the gigantic daisies, the heaven-consuming dandelions, the great Odyssey of strange-coloured oceans and strange-shaped trees, of dust like the wreck of temples, and thistledown like the ruin of stars—all this colossal vision shall perish with the last of the humble.<sup>4</sup>

Did you get that? It's better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly because then, and only then, can you see the glory of Christ!

The proud man looks down on creation because he looks down on the creator. Agur, the humble man who had not attained to human knowledge, was able to be amazed by creation precisely because he was humble and looked up to his Creator.

#### **A. Four Nasty Generations, vv. 11-13**

So in his humble amazement at the world, what did Agur see? He saw whole generations given over to vice. The first of these generations has no sense of honor for father and mother. Instead, this generation thinks it is much wiser than its parents and so curses them. Sound familiar?

The next generation is a generation of Pharisees, a whole generation so self-righteous that they can't bend their necks in humility. They won't be washed, and so they will never be clean.

The third generation is totally arrogant. Their nose is permanently stuck in the air. And the final generation is violent against the poor and needy.

What are we to make of this? Well, we can say that there really is such a thing as a generational characteristic. We believe that we know what Baby Boomers are like, and that we know what Millennials are like. Thankfully, neither of them are as rotten as these generations. But there are whole generations who turn away from the wisdom of humility and instead pursue the folly of thinking well of themselves even while they destroy so much good.

#### **B. The Greedy Leech, v. 15a**

Fitting neatly between the two numerical sayings is this double-ended leech with two blood-sucking ends, called "daughters" in the text. Both of them want nothing more than to suck blood. They cry "give" all day long. That, of course, introduces the idea of insatiability that Agur will highlight in the next saying, even as by referring to "daughters" it clearly harks back to the

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<sup>4</sup> Chesterton, "A Defense of Humility," in *The Defendant* (1901).

idea of a generation with a particular characteristic. The insatiable generation that devours is instantiated in the insatiable leech. And in fact, there are other insatiable things out there:

### **C. Four Insatiable Things, vv. 15b-16**

The first of these is the grave. You can just keep burying people, just keep on letting them die or even killing them outright, and Sheol doesn't appear to be full. The very idea of death turning away customers, or announcing "No vacancy" in Hell, is ludicrous. The barren womb, too, sucks in countless shots of semen without ever producing life, without ever getting fertilized by all the fertilizer sprayed into it. It never says "Enough; here's a baby." The dirt can never have too much water; if you water it once, it always needs to be watered again the next day. And finally, fire is the ultimate example of something that just keeps devouring, world without end, amen. Human beings can become like this. We all know people who cry "give, give." Agur's humility is first of all simply observing that these things are out there in this world. Second, though, it is a warning that we had better not be insatiable, and also that we had better not be the kind of generation who is greedy, violent, or self-righteous and arrogant!

### **III. Humility's Second Demand: Honor Your Social Superiors, v. 17**

You see, humility demands not only that you look around in wonder at the world, but also that you morally evaluate what you see. It is not humility to simply "This is, and as such it is neither good nor bad." No. Humility says "I see this, and it is good; I see that, and it is evil." Well, humility demands that you honor your father and mother. If you don't, your dead body will lie unburied and the ravens, vultures, and eagles will devour it.

It's hard to avoid denouncing some lowly person who gets in our way and doesn't help like he should. But it is also hard to honor those in authority — parents, boss, mother-in-law, etc. Yet the humble person does in fact honor them, because he doesn't want to be like the wicked generation that won't bless its mother. Again, the wise son lives to make his father glad. If you don't honor your earthly father and your Heavenly Father, you do not understand wisdom.

### **IV. Humility's Observations, vv. 18-31**

And so Agur presents us with four more observations. Once again, his evaluation is only hinted at, or not even that. Yet we should not doubt that these observations teach us not only the joy of humility, but also by implication teach us something about what the wise son thinks of the things observed.

#### **A. Four Wonderful Ways, and a Fifth, vv. 18-20**

The first saying in this set tells of four wonderful things, so amazing that Agur simply can't understand them. The way in which the eagle, snake, ship, and lover go, the "way" in which they travel and express themselves and do their thing, is utterly amazing. What's even more amazing is how the adulterous woman thinks of sexual unfaithfulness as nothing more important than snagging an Oreo. When lovely woman stoops to folly — she doesn't even notice. That seems to be the most astonishing way of the five. Humility is amazed by created majesty, but it is even more amazed by fallen human beings and how utterly despicable they can be.

In other words, if adultery seems pretty normal to you, you don't have the wisdom of humility. You are blase about the wrong things.

### **B. Four Things that Shake the Earth, vv. 21-23**

There are another four things that earth itself rejects. All of these things are people who rise into a place for which they are definitely unsuited. This is bad boss syndrome taken to its extreme. The idea here is not so much that the social hierarchy should never change as that those with rotten character do really badly at the top.

If you have a chip on your shoulder now, guess what you'll have when you become the authority? The same chip. A bad attitude isn't cured by promotion.

### **C. Four Wise Little Creatures, vv. 24-28**

Yet though human beings can get out of their places, these four weak creatures make up for their weakness by exercising a corresponding strength. The ants plan ahead; the coney hides in rocks; the locusts march in a unified fashion; and the lizard lives in luxury (or at least in a luxurious building). Humility has time to look at ants; pride is too impressed with itself to take notice of rock badgers and lizards.

### **D. Four Majestic Striders, vv. 29-31**

Agur's final set of observations looks at the strutting pride of these four majestic animals. Their pride, perhaps, is warranted. Let the lion swagger.

## **V. Humility's Third Demand: Honor the People You're Tempted to Provoke, vv. 32-33**

But don't you dare do it yourself. If you're humble enough to enjoy the swagger of a lion or a king, then you are also humble enough to not imitate that swagger yourself.

### **A. Shut Up if You're Arrogant or a Wannabe Evildoer, v. 32**

If you are arrogant, shut up. Quit talking. Cover your mouth in shame as you realize what you've done — whether that was to denounce a servant to his master, or to refuse to honor your parents, or to exercise arrogance in some other way, you are guilty and have no business bragging on yourself further.

### **B. Kneading Always Works, v. 33**

Why? Because your arrogance, in addition to keeping you from learning anything (see vv. 1-9), will also get you into fights. Agur, with his fondness for parallels within nature, closes by pointing out that kneading always works.

#### **1. Knead Cream, Get Butter**

Knead cream (churn cream), and you'll get butter. That's just how the world works.

#### **2. Knead the Nose, Get Blood**

Same with the nose. Knead it with your fists, and it will start to bleed.

#### **3. Knead Wrath, Get Strife**

And finally, knead someone's wrath, and you will get yourself the exact kind of fight you want — or don't want. The point is that arrogance always invites others to fight you. Arrogance overlooks the obvious; arrogance is not amazed by the beauty of this world and the complexity of its creatures. Arrogance is amazed by its own brilliance and nothing else. So be humble, like

Agur. Learn the wisdom of Jesus, who honored His inferiors (us) by coming to die for us; who honored His superiors (His earthly parents; His Heavenly Father) by obeying and listening to them; and who never exalted Himself, but rather humbled Himself to come live and die as one of us.

Brothers and sisters, Agur shows the wisdom of humility. Jesus shows it too. Do you want that wisdom today? And if you've been arrogant, if you know you have an arrogant heart, what should you do? Turn in repentance. You are called to peace and humility — the humility that accepts Jesus' death in your place, and the peace that comes from being reconciled with God. He has made a way for you to know the wisdom of humility. So do it: Meet with Jesus, the one who is lowly of heart, and learn from Him under His yoke. You'll find that humility is a far lighter burden than pride. Amen.