

Humility

1 Peter 5:5b-7

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When I left Columbia Presbyterian I was told that I would be besieged with requests to preach and teach and lead seminars and do all kinds of ministry. And I was in for a big surprise, because that is not at all what happened. I could give you a dozen examples of ministries that I initiated, thought about, made overtures for—and they never took off, they never transpired, people wouldn't get back to me. And kind of, you know, after a couple of months...Oh, that Allen Harris... Yeah, I forgot all about you. It went on and on and on. I wrote a very well put together—if I will say so myself—technical article for a theological journal addressing a very needed topic in our day, and it was rejected without even giving me a reason. So I have been surprised as I have sought to find out, God, what is it you want me to do? I struggle with the loss of a sense of importance and purpose. And I began to wonder God, why do you have us here? What's going on?

And gradually it began to dawn on me that perhaps God's purpose for me was to humble me. That what he was doing was something that was deeper and more important in his estimation in my life than what I was too blind to see. So I began to meditate on 1 Peter, Chapter 5, the end of verse 5 to verse 7, which is about humility. And I've spent the last couple of years thinking about that passage. And so this morning I want to share with you some of my discoveries from that, in the possibility that there may be some of you out there who are wrestling with your sense of purpose and wondering what God is doing for you, struggling with pride—feeling you are not getting the recognition that you deserve, and wondering where God is in all that.

Take a look at 1 Peter 5:7, you'll see on the screen there. It's a verse we all love because it's so full of comfort and promise.

...casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. [ESV, 1 Peter 5:7]

Literally it is: “because it matters to him concerning you.” And the NIV has that as a separate sentence, but the ESV more correctly shows that it's really part of the same sentence in verse 6. So when you see the two verses put together, you see that it's:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. [ESV, 1 Peter 5:6-7]

But it's even larger than that, because the real thought begins at the end of verse 5.

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. [ESV, 1 Peter 5:5b-7]

I want you to see, as I've been discovering, the connection between casting our anxieties on God and humbling ourselves under his mighty hand. So I want to open up a very simple outline; you see it in your bulletin there. There are two commands, and those two commands are about humility and they're related. Then there's two reasons that are given for you and me to humble ourselves under God's hand, and those are promises that powerfully motivate us.

So the first command, you see, is to clothe yourselves with humility toward others. Clothe yourself with humility. The idea there is to take on a servant's towel like Jesus when he washed the disciples' feet. Clothe yourselves. Put yourself under a lower position. Think about others' needs and not just your own. I'm very good at being aware of what my needs are and how you can serve me. I'm not nearly as good at clothing myself with humility to be able to know what your needs are and how I might serve you.

But you know what? Retirement helps. You've probably heard that old saying: I married you for better or for worse, but not for lunch. So I began to see that when two sinners lived together 24/7, either they're going to learn to be more like Jesus or one of them's gotta get a job. And I didn't have the option for the job, and Kathy subs, but I had to begin to be more sensitive to what it meant to serve her. To load and unload the dishwasher and wipe off the counter without expecting applause. To begin to listen more carefully to what it was that was really on her mind. And to think how I could serve her.

You know, I thought that I would be working with leaders in various capacities, but God put us in a neighborhood where the people are, by and large, in their 80's. People don't go into retirement homes in Cape Cod, or at least the outer Cape. They hang on until they die in their home. And they look for younger people to serve them so that they can. It was less than a year after we got there—six, seven months—that a couple came over. We met them and I got to know him a little bit. And I found out that he had become a Christian in 1974, and for 38 years he had been praying for his wife to become a Christian. For 38 years she stalwartly resisted him and dug in her heels and wanted nothing to do with Christ. We started an Alpha Group, which is an introduction to Christianity, and she came! He was shocked that she came. Not only did she come, but within a month she said she needed Jesus, and she prayed to receive Jesus. And she was in her early 80's. And I thought well, thank you, Lord, this is the beginning of leading our neighborhood to Christ. But in the six years she is the only one that had come to Christ. Most of the rest of the neighbors we shared the gospel with had little or no interest. But they wanted to have a relationship with us, largely because there were needs, and we could serve. So we began to learn more about what that was.

Which leads me to the second point. The first reason God gives why you clothe yourself with humility to serve others, is because God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. That is, they don't call the shots in who they are going to serve. They serve who God puts before them. That's a quote from Proverbs 3:34, what the end of verse 5 says there. Isaiah 57 puts it this way:

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
"I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with him was a contrary and lowly spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly,

and to revive the heart of the contrite.” [ESV, Isaiah 57:15]

God says he distances himself from proud, self-sufficient, aggressive, overachiever types like Howard County and like some of the other places that we all are aware. He says I draw close to those who realize they are not self-sufficient. They're not thinking how they can use people to get ahead, but they look for how they can serve people who may be seen as nobodies in the world's eyes.

I think of Spurgeon, considered one of the prince of preachers—some would say the most effective preacher of all time, certainly considered the finest preacher of the 19th century—a very humble man. And after his first pastorate, he was moving into his next pastorate, and one morning he shared this with his congregation. “I did not expect to see so many conversions in this place as I had a year ago, when I had far fewer hearers. Do you ask why? Why, a year ago I was abused by everybody. To mention my name was to mention the name of the most abominable buffoon that ever lived. The mere utterance of it brought forth oaths and curses. With many men it was the name of contempt, kicked about the street like a football. But then God gave me souls by hundreds who were added to my church. And in one year it was my happiness personally to see not less than a thousand who had been converted. I do not expect that now. My name is somewhat esteemed, and the great ones of the earth think it no dishonor to sit at my feet. But this makes me fear lest my God should forsake me while the world esteems me. I would rather be despised and slandered than aught else.” I realized that I did not share that spirit, and God had to teach me things.

So the third point is the second command: Humble yourself under God's mighty hand. Don't just wait for him to give you the insight. Decide what it is that you have to offer innately. In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul says that you do not have anything of yourself that you have not received, received from God. Therefore, he says, why do you boast? You don't have anything that came from within you. You can't keep yourself alive. You certainly cannot earn God's favor. You look and you realize the more life goes on and the more you and I go on in life, you can't do life on your own. You can't be self-sufficient. So God draws close to those who are in touch with reality. You need me. You need me for physical life. You need me for spiritual life. He wants to show you that he is there for you when you humble yourself. He says he draws close to the contrite, to the broken hearted, you see in the Scriptures and the things that we were singing this morning. He who exalts himself will be humbled. He who humbles himself will be exalted. I gotta learn that. I thought I knew that. But I didn't know anything like I needed to know it.

And then that leads you to the fourth point: the blessings. The blessings are at the end of verse six where he says, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you.” That's interesting. The idea is not that you and I stay in that humble, low position forever. But that, as Paul Miller puts it, it's like a J-curve. You are brought down so that you will be brought up. And suddenly you find more interest in Jesus as he's portrayed in the Gospels, because it is as a servant. As Jesus walked around as Messiah, the King of the New Kingdom, how did he spend his time? It was saying to blind beggars, widows, lepers, cripples: What do you want me to do for you?

Remember in Matthew 20 he talks to the disciples, and a couple of them have this little discussion. And they say Jesus, we presume that you've noticed that we're pretty important, and that we really add to your retinue here. And we would just like to get a little assurance in

advance that we're going to have two chief places in the kingdom. Right? That makes sense? Sure? And of course you remember that Jesus rebuked them and said no, no, you know that the chief places go to the people who serve. In fact, the really chief place is the one who's the slave of all, because "even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Did you ever notice how Matthew portrays that and what he puts in the very next verse. Matthew Chapter 20. After he says that, verse 29 says, "And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, 'Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!' The crowd rebuked them..." Told him shut up! You're a disturbance, you're embarrassing. "But they cried out all the more, "'Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!' And stopping..." What does Jesus do? Stopping, he calls them and he says, "What do you want me to do for you?" Lord, heal our eyes. And he does. The trail (?) of his life is service to nobodies. And he's the one that we follow. You want to get to know Jesus better? Learn to follow his servant's heart.

And so we began to see that God was leading us into territory that we probably wouldn't have chosen to go. And Scriptures go on to describe this Jesus as the one in Philippians Chapter 2, who, though he was in the form of God, had not something to grasp onto, but rather humbled himself as a servant and became obedient even unto death, even the death on a cross. So Jesus gave himself as the servant to hang on a cross, covered with absolutely nothing except his blood and spittle, because he would not give you up. He served you by bearing the burden of your sin. So that if you have humbled yourself before God and see your need of him, then you come and you say Lord Jesus, I can't begin to imagine what it cost you to serve me so that I would be with you forever. But Paul goes on. So he was exalted, he was highly lifted up so that every knee should bow before him.

Now notice the connection with that and what Peter says. What does he mean when he says humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, so that he, in due time. . . The due time is when Jesus comes back. You might be lifted up here and there in this life somewhat, but if you read the context of 1 Peter you see that the due time, the proper time, is when Jesus comes in glory. And so verse 4 of Chapter 5 says: "And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." Looking forward to that? What does it mean? It means in some way—that you and I cannot understand now—Jesus is going to share his glory with you. He is going to give you a glory you and I could not begin to imagine now. Not a glory that is beyond our humanness, but an unfading glory to those that were humbled before him and followed him as the chief servant.

I've had a lot that I needed to learn about that. I expected to teach at a seminary and that didn't work out. I expected to mentor pastors, and I've done that somewhat, but not like I thought. Thought I would lead seminars—well, one or two, but not like I thought. What God has done is open our eyes to what it means to serve people. The one woman who became a believer in our first year at Cape Cod dropped dead almost exactly a year later. The result of that was that her 86 year old husband comes by our house a couple times a week, walks in the door, and starts talking. He's lonely. When I say talking, this guy will go on for two hours nonstop without asking a single question. Now he's a dear guy, and I do believe he's a believer. But he's lonely. And he simply says you're here and I need you to listen to me.

My next door neighbor broke his ankle. He was so disliked by the rest of the neighbors, nobody knew it, and when we told them, they didn't care. There was nobody to help him out. He had four parakeets; they were his only friends in the world. So he asked us to feed his parakeets. We went over every day and we fed the parakeets and we got his mail. And then when he got home from the hospital he said I don't have any way of getting food. So every week we got his food, delivered it. And then I was really struck when one time I told him we're going to be going away for three weeks, so we're not going to be able to get you your food. You need to get somebody else to do that. And that's when I found out, that he said you are the only person that cares if I live or die. I won't eat for three weeks if you don't get me food. What do you do? Tough. God lowers you and you say this guy needs us. I had shared the gospel with him. He said I'm not interested in that; I'm not that big a sinner. So give me my mail, give me my food—but I don't want your Jesus.

Cross the street and up the hill there's a farm. A husband and wife farm the land, chickens and horses and various animals and a lot of crops. A couple months ago their son died of a bad batch of heroin. He had been on drugs for years and years. His life was reduced to living in the chicken coop. So when he died, again we went over. What can we do to help? Did a few things from the funeral and the rest of that. But I had begun to meet with him. I had already shared the gospel with him years before, but I thought maybe this is another opportunity. So I would meet with them and we would talk, but there are still wasn't any marked increase. And in fact he said. . . I said does this change your interest in Jesus? Well, he said, not much. But what he needed, he said, was for somebody to go into the chicken coop where his son had died, because he said I can't bear to go in there. So I said, you want me to clean it out? That would be really nice. So I cleaned out the chicken coop of this dead heroin addict and spent time with this guy. One day I went over there and there was an oysterman there. And so I spent a morning, one morning, sitting with a farmer and a Wellfleet oysterman, getting their perspective on life. It was a precious morning. I honestly tell you I felt privileged to be accepted by those guys, because they live in a different world. And they shared that world with me. And when I went back the oysterman was glad to see me, and we were friends. When you take the low place, even for a little bit, you begin to learn the privilege of getting into people's lives who treasure the relationship that you have.

My wife, Kathy, was in a writer's group, and she was in that for some months. And one of the women in that group became, you know, almost immobile. She could barely walk with a walker, but she was desperate to stay in her house. So she asked Kathy could you come over and make dinner for me once a week, and I'll try to get some other people. So for, I don't know how long now—a year or two—she's been every week, goes over once a week to make dinner. Shared the gospel with her, said could I pray with you? Wasn't interested in that. Wasn't interested in the gospel, wasn't interested in prayer. But she asked Kathy to do more. How about you come twice a week. Maybe you could do this, maybe you could take me here, maybe you could do that. She does some things that she can.

When you are in the lower place, you are vulnerable. And that, my friends, is why we have verse seven. Because, you see, Peter is saying when you are vulnerable to follow Jesus in being a servant, people will use you, and you will begin to feel like does anybody care about my needs? He says let me tell you. . . Humble yourselves—verse six—therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you. There's One who cares for you beyond anything you can imagine. And

he draws close to the broken hearted and the vulnerable. And God has begun to teach me, especially as I get older—you get older, you get more anxious about the things you can't control and do—of what it means to cast my anxieties on my Heavenly Father.

The word 'cast' that is used here is only used one other time in the New Testament, in Luke 19:35. You don't have to turn to it, let me just tell you it. It's about Palm Sunday, and it's when the disciples took their garments, it says, and they cast them on a donkey for Jesus to ride. Now that's a physical picture. (You know, some of you still were asking are you going to do a T-shirt illustration when I come up here to preach? No.) But the illustration is this. You think of your anxieties and your cares, and you cast them on the Lord. Then sometimes you may be so anxious about something in your life, that it may help you to actually think of physically...I'm taking this Lord, now, and I'm casting it on you, cause I can't handle it. I don't know what to do about this. And that's when you remind yourself it matters to him concerning you. Can you imagine that? The God of Heaven, the God of the galaxies. . . I just saw a video that said there are more galaxies in the universe than there are grains of sand on all the beaches. And how many stars are in the galaxies? That one listens to you and to me, because Jesus his Son died for you. And he says come on, cast those anxieties, those cares on me.

I began to learn that when I misplaced something and I couldn't find it. . .I would, you know, I would snort and look around and grrrrr, where is this thing, and Kathy, what did you do with this, you know, you must have hidden it or something, and I couldn't find it, you know. Then I began to realize why don't I ask my Heavenly Father? Lord, would you show me where that is? I need that. And what would happen, sometimes in such unusual ways that I thought—I would have never thought of that—and it has actually taught me, now, before I start getting all upset, to cast the anxiety on the Lord.

Last year we were in Paris. I decided to buy a French SIM card for my smartphone. And that was very helpful, but I had to make sure I stored my original American SIM card, not only because I my contacts were on there, but the guy that was going to pick us up at the airport—I needed to call him—and I had to have that SIM card to do that, and I simply couldn't find it. It disappeared. How could it disappear? Of course they're only that big, but I knew I needed it. So I thought I'm going to be very careful where I put this, and I blew it. I could not find that thing. I looked at—you know, everything you have was in a suitcase. And I went through the whole suitcase. Nothing. So finally I said Lord, please, show me where that silly SIM card is. And then—it wasn't like it popped up and said here I am—I went on for two, three days, but not fretting. But just saying Lord, you're my Heavenly Father. You said cast my anxieties on you. I cast it...Please! Three days later, for whatever reason, my mind was drawn to a fold in the bottom of the briefcase, and there was the SIM card. Casting all your anxieties, because it matters to him concerning you. That's daily.

I was asking a woman just recently what's God teaching you? She says that my faith will be tested every day. It sounds so simple but it's really profound. If you start each day saying Lord, my faith is going to be tested today, help me to rest on you. Help me to follow Jesus with a servant's heart. And when I call somebody on a business thing and I'm put on hold and twenty minutes later I am still on hold and I am starting to say things that a Christian shouldn't say and I begin to think what I'm going to tell that person when they finally get on that phone—I said No, Lord, they're a human being and they're probably under pressure. I'm going to ask you to get me out of this. It makes it a habit, it's a way of thinking, it is just a way of dealing with life.

And so you see those two blanks down there. It's learning to cast and learning to [serve.] And seeing that what Peter does, is he puts those two things together.

But you know, a strange thing has happened in all this. First of all, I've become less concerned about whether I will have some important ministry. And a couple of weeks ago a fellow called me from a national ministry. And he said we would like to talk to you about mentoring pastors and churches. Now, I share that with you because I don't know if that's going to work out—it might, it might not, I don't know. What was interesting to me was how my heart had changed. Because there would have been a time where I would have thought: Well, it's about time you guys noticed me! But my response, honestly, was I was scared. Because I thought, I'm not up to that. How can I help pastors and churches see Jesus in a way that they will repent and change how they think about their communities? I can't do that. So when you begin to get a hold of the connection between the serving, the humbling, and the casting, you begin to see life differently. You begin to get closer to Jesus, and you begin to realize—as I did when I prayed about that—Lord, if I'm going to do this, I really need to depend on you. And I don't mean that like I might have meant that six years ago. I mean that because right to the bottom of my toes I know I am inadequate.

Let me finish with a simple little illustration that caught my attention. On Easter our church sold daffodils. And so I thought Kathy would like a daffodil, and I plopped in the ten dollars to buy a daffodil that would be displayed on Easter and then you take them home. But Kathy, being a bigger servant than me, decided that she would go into the nursery during the first service, so that other moms could be in the worship service. Which meant that we were going to go home after the first service, and it dawned on me—I can't take the daffodil home after the first service, because then the people in the second service won't have it. So I'm in the first service and I'm kind of fretting there, how can I get that daffodil. Who could be here the second service—maybe they could bring it over to my house, maybe they could do that. And I was not worshipping because I was distracted. And I stopped and I said Lord, you're trying to teach me this. I'm going to cast this on you. You want me to have a daffodil, you want Kathy to have a daffodil—that's up to you, Lord. I'm not going to think about it anymore. And I didn't. I just worshiped. And in the service the pastor says, and by the way, if you're in the first service and you're not going to be back in the second service, feel free to take your daffodil home—we're just going to rearrange them. I mean, the guy invited me: Take your daffodil, Al! Great! Thank you, Lord. It's off my mind. So after the first service I take the daffodil. An hour later, after we come home, a guy comes from the second service with a daffodil in his hand to our front door. And he says here's your daffodil. I said um, nope, we already got our daffodil. He said I was told to give you a daffodil. And I thought Lord, isn't that like you—who cares in the whole universe... I paid for a daffodil. I thought I lost a daffodil. You said give it to me, I'll give you two daffodils.

Let me ask you: Where is it in your life that God's trying to teach you to connect serving and casting. Maybe there's an unbeliever that you've been trying to reach for the gospel, and they're not interested. I believe seriously that in this generation—I mean since I left Columbia Presbyterian—the way the church is going to reach Howard County and the area that we live in is by being servants that they don't see other people doing. People that are willing to say what can I do for you? And after a period of time of that, they begin to wonder why you're different. Maybe God's trying to draw you closer to himself and you've been resisting. You've been taking care of yourself and you've been using God as a last resort when other things don't work. That he's telling you this morning to humble yourself under his mighty hand, so that he can lift you

up. He can draw close to your heart as he does, as he delights to do to the contrite, to the dependent, to those who cast their anxieties on him, because they know they need him. Do you know that? Or is God still trying to get your attention on that?

Let's pray. Lord, we are a proud people. We are a people who so want to take care of ourselves and use you as a second option. And I pray, Lord, that you would speak to the hearts of each of us in the particular ways that you want to get ahold of us. Maybe it's someone who has never even come to Jesus as Savior, because I don't really need you. Get ahold of that person's heart now. Maybe it's somebody who's been resisting someone who's not very likable and you're calling them to serve. Show us, Lord, and give us hearts that are willing. And Lord, show us the wonder, the wonder of a Jesus who says come, come to me, cast your anxieties on me now, because it matters to me concerning you. I died for you, I have risen, and when I come back I'm going to give you an unfading crown of glory. So Lord Jesus, we look to you, we rest in you, and we wait anxiously for that coming. Work in our hearts, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.