

The Same

Wayne Waibel – 08/28/2022

“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Now that’s the kind of mantra teachers should have been requiring us to write on the chalkboard a hundred times. Not the “I will not talk in class” type of corrective phrases typically decreed.

Or in my case – the truly brutal teacher who set out to crush my little spirit by sentencing me to the phrase, “I will not spit on the playground even though I’ve had dirt kicked in my mouth because it is a vile and disgusting habit practiced only by neophytes and other such vermin; not third grade boys who have been well schooled in the fine art of civilized behavior.”

Of course I remembered the phrase exactly. I’d written it a hundred and fifty times on the chalkboard. It took three days. I went through a gross of chalk.

That was probably more humiliation than humility, but it’s in the neighborhood. And it did have the effect of showing me the power of repetition. I not only do not spit on playgrounds – I don’t spit – period. That’s why I can’t scuba dive. I won’t spit into my goggles.

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Receiving a blessing that invites us to grow into a deeper relationship with God is not something we can work our way into through acts designed to display our worth. That's part of what Jesus is trying to impart to a privileged audience that is watching Him very closely. They are rightfully afraid of Him. He speaks truth to power.

In first century Palestine there are very specific rules of engagement when it comes to social functions. And since Jesus is acutely aware of those rules – he uses them to His advantage in driving home a profound truth:

The realm of God establishes its own social and spiritual order; trying to presume a place in that order is unwise.

It's not the first time Jesus uses an ancient Jewish custom to illuminate the new covenant. The book of Luke is itself a study of diversity, humility and shattered geopolitical barriers that holds up even by today's standards.

It is awash with controversy and discord, salient points, and cryptic directives. While it may lack the eloquence of John – it more than makes up for that with its sheer volume of profound truth.

There is much within its chapters to enlighten and direct one's faith. To say nothing of its historical relevance, and I dare say – it's pure adventure in reading. It's not an accident that the Lukan Christmas story, for example, is universally offered every year.

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The prophet Jeremiah forewarns the ancient Israelites of their impending punishment at the hand of the Babylonians as a result of their egregious transgressions before the Lord. And still – they do not relent. We can be a stubborn and headstrong people.

I see it every single time I get assigned to a committee or task force. We begin the first meeting by going around the table introducing ourselves. What follows is an onslaught of philosophies, accomplishments, degrees and mostly resumes' that have less to do with who we are than how we expect to be viewed.

When it comes to my turn, I follow my military training as dictated by the Geneva Convention – name, rank, and serial number. Except – I skip the rank and substitute department for serial number.

It used to be because I was simply following the instructions at the outset of the meeting, "Tell us who you are and where you work," but more and more it has been a conscious effort to minimize my Self, and focus instead on others. When you're more engaged with the well-being of others – your own welfare is taken care of, because we are in good hands.

Humility is a tough sell, I know. The youth of today leave a lot to be desired in the areas of work ethic and entitlement. How do you make the concept of humbling yourself attractive in a world whose very fabric is determined by likes or clicks or views? Humble is not exactly trending.

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To walk humbly with God is more than a simple statement turned into a directive that leads to salvation. It is at the forefront of all that God holds dear in His love for His people, and has been since Adam and Eve. "I am your God, and you are My people."

To know the Lord is to participate in the life of God. The work of actually praising God and meaning it is transformative; it changes you.

The good news is that in His life, death and resurrection Jesus embodied what He taught, and He taught what He embodied. A more perfect example there has never been, or will ever be. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

All of the grace demonstrated throughout the Bible is based in humility. The Psalmist reminds Israel that, "Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries." And this does not necessarily mean smite them. It could just mean a softening of their hearts - a change in perspective. God can do that.

The author of Hebrews reminds us that by entertaining strangers, we have unwittingly entertained angels. Again – an act of humility results in glory beyond our ability to measure. And Jesus absolutely delights in the revelation that humility results in divine exaltation.

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We get to move through the trials of each day knowing that Christ has overcome them all. There really is no recourse for us other than to walk humbly with God.

What does that look like? A truly humble servant is unable even to classify how they live and move and have their being as a humble walk with God. Because in the final analysis – it is not our assessment to make.

It is completely up to God. All we can do really, is aim for the mark. I have to believe that making the conscious effort to take the shot is what separates us from those who would embellish their own worth.

Fortunately we have a clear target to emulate in our Savior. And it's not even a moving target, because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Amen.