

Greatness Through Humility

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Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[0 : 01] Let's bow our heads and pray together, shall we? Heavenly, gracious Father, we recall how your Son, Jesus, told his disciples that we are called to be salt and light in this society in which we find ourselves.

And Father, we take that to mean that we are supposed to influence the culture in which we live for good. And yet, Lord, we humbly confess to you that it feels very often that this world has shaped the culture of the church rather than the other way around.

So, Lord, speak to us this morning. Implant your truth deep within us that our lives might reveal your glory in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen. Jesus said to his disciples, not so with you. In other words, it wasn't the only time Jesus said it, but in other words, Jesus is saying that the way you think needs to be different than the way the world thinks.

And this morning, we're continuing with our course of sermons on Christian character. That's really important. I think God is far more concerned in the power of his Holy Spirit to shape your character.

[1 : 44] He's more interested in your character, who you are, than what you do. And so, we come today to think about something which I think is very counter-cultural today.

That is the idea that the disciples of Jesus are called to humility, to be humble people.

I think that it's hardly contentious to kind of stress that. But I wonder if you have really thought about the way the world is and what you think about humility.

See, we're talking about descending into humility. Isn't it interesting that the world has a completely different language.

We talk about getting to the top. We talk about he's risen to great things. And yet, our topic today, and the Bible reading we had, suggests we think again.

[3 : 02] Think about descending to greatness, not just ascending to it. I haven't seen too many seminars advertised on the internet, encouraging people to go and learn to be how more humble.

And I wonder, if such a course existed, whether anybody would actually go to it. For today, we're more concerned about assertiveness.

In a way, in an indirect way, I think that's where human rights legislation has had a slightly negative impact on wider society. Because it makes us assertive.

I want to assert my rights. Very often against your rights. And there are lessons you can take in going to be assertive.

I don't think we've run any on that particular subject in this church yet, but there's always time. The Bible gives a very, very different perspective on the way Christian character should be formed.

[4 : 12] And it should be formed around humility. In Matthew chapter 5, when Jesus talks about what we call the Beatitudes, all those sayings that begin with the words, blessed are those.

The first of those Beatitudes is, blessed are those who are poor in spirit. For they shall see the kingdom of God.

Not blessed are those who pump themselves up, who are keen to assert themselves all the time. No. Those who are poor in spirit. Those who are clear about their own failures.

I don't know about you, but I find one of the hardest things to find, to come to face with in my own walk with God, is my failures.

Somehow I can always kind of think of an excuse. But the bottom line is, to be humble, one of the starting points is, to take responsibility for your failures.

[5 : 29] A while ago, I was speaking at a large kind of national holiday week, and I was doing the Bible readings there, day by day.

And the first few days, we had wonderful worship leaders, Tim Hughes, and what's he called? The guy that wrote, da, da, da, da, da, da.

Never mind. And these guys are so humble. And at the time, you know, it's kind of, all people who are doing the presentation feel, quite rightly, they need to do that.

And as they try to express a word of thanks, and they tended to overdo it, when they did it, and kind of really big up the worship leader, and the band. And I noticed that people like Tim Hughes, and the other guy who I can't remember, when that happened, they just quietly disappeared, and the back of the stage.

And then one day, one day, there was another worship leader, and I went to him before, I think it was the last day, and I said to him, I would like that wonderful hymn, I Surrender All, at the end of what I want to say today.

[6 : 51] Is that okay? He goes, no. No. I'm like, excuse me? He said, no. He said, the band have rehearsed what we're going to do, and we ain't changing anything.

And steadfastly refused to do it. I mean, just compare the two different attitudes. So, we're talking about descending into greatness.

What does that mean? Well, Hot Off the Press was a paper written in this month's Psychology magazine, written by a lady called Madalena Paunel.

And Madalena Paunel is an associate professor of psychology in the University of Leeds. And he's a very well-qualified person.

And she wrote her article, and the heading of it was why psychology needs to, needs what she called a humility revolution.

[8 : 06] Let me say that again. This is a top psychologist, writing in the professional magazine of psychology. This is the title of her paper, Psychology Needs a Humility Revolution.

She argues on the basis that the history of psychology has involved a good many U-turns. This is what we used to think, but we don't think that anymore now.

Incidentally, humility in the 1998 copy of the Oxford Dictionary in a rather negative way, it defines humility as having a low opinion of oneself.

An extraordinary definition in 1998 that was. Professor Paunel thinks that we need a revolution in psychology, humility revolution in psychology because of all the discounted theories that there are. And also, she points out that moral lapses occur regularly between psychologist and client. Her antidote to that is let's, let's have a humility revolution.

[9 : 30] Time will tell whether she's successful in her plea, but her argument is the reason we need to be humble in our psychological research is this, it is necessarily limited and incomplete.

In fact, on that basis, you could basically question all research that's ever been done. Partly because the people who are doing the researching are fallen human beings like you and me.

It doesn't mean that research can't carry truth, but it usually means that it carries with it a message as well. Professor Paunel says, all research, all psychological research is limited and incomplete.

When I thought about that, I thought that wouldn't be a bad description of the way the Bible thinks of us human beings. We are limited people, limited largely by the outcome of sin in our lives.

We are never incomplete in this sense that in this life you will never become what you will become if you are in Christ.

[10 : 58] I don't think humility is only the domain of Christians. Of course not. There are humble people who I don't think would claim a Christian faith.

I suppose in the last century you might think of somebody like Nelson Mandela who completely changed his mind about how to bring about freedom for black people in South Africa.

You could compare that with a black person called Muhammad Ali who in 1967 I believe it was voted the 20th century man of the century.

Remember this is a man whose strap line was barely humble. I am the greatest. See I'm not quite clear how much our world values humility and it would be a shame wouldn't it if in the church our characters individually and character corporately was a character that was not humble.

I want to just ask you one or two questions now and I don't need to shout out the answer but I want you just to think about these questions. First question are you able to receive feedback?

[12 : 43] Let me ask that again. Are you able to receive feedback? My experience having been in a leadership role for most of my life is that on the whole I don't find people that ready to receive feedback.

Say I have moments when I wonder whether I can receive feedback particularly when it comes via my loving therapist and wife.

I would love to be able to report to you that every time my wife has said to me something like feedback I have never as far as I recall gone down on all knees and thanked God for incredible insight and wisdom.

No I found myself being resistant to it. Is that humble? I don't think it is. Second thing is let me ask you do you refuse to even listen to those who think differently than you do?

Or do you go around the world inadvertently creating enemies? Do you even listen to those who think differently than you?

[14 : 08] Two social psychologists noted that one of the things that is being taught now in our universities is this dualism.

The idea that the world is full of good people and or bad people. And the trouble is I'm a good person but I think everybody else who doesn't agree with me is evil.

See we're losing via an attack on free speech we're losing the ability I think to have proper discussion over things which we disagree about.

Third question really important deep in our culture in this country do you have a pecking order?

That is are there some people who you gravitate towards you may even want to be like them etc etc and then there are a whole lot more people.

People we look down on people we look up to. And while we hold that kind of world to you it's very difficult to believe that something like humility will emerge.

[15 : 36] Fourth question do you constantly find yourself borrowing strength? Ultimately borrowing strength from things that won't give you strength.

I mean I think that's the kind of subtext of that sketch. What do I mean? Do we try and borrow strength from things like status, position, your perceived identity, your educational qualifications, your titles, all these things.

If you're hanging on to them and trying to borrow strength from them then I suggest that humility is going to be an issue for you. psychology needs a humility revolution.

I'm tempted to say the world needs a humility revolution. I'm tempted to say the church needs a humility revolution.

at the base of it all I think is what we believe about God and what we believe about ourselves and the two are very integrately related in the person of Jesus Christ.

[17 : 08] we are limited by our own self-centeredness and we're incomplete without faith in God. I want to close by reading a passage which in some ways I think would have been more appropriate to this topic.

If ever there was a place in Holy Writ where the whole issue of descending to greatness was absolutely fundamentally clear, it would be in Philippians 2.

Paul is talking to a church that he thinks has got a lot of good things going for it. He's very grateful for them. He's writing from prison in the year AD 62 and he writes stuff like this.

Verse 3, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but in humility consider others better than yourselves. I think that would be a challenging statement to much 20th century psychology.

Verse 4, each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. and then absolute bombshell.

[18 : 38] Jesus is talking to his disciples. You remember in the reading we had, it was the disciples of Jesus who got it all wrong. James and John, two of the key disciples in the kind of, when I say the top three, I mean the three that Jesus regularly took aside.

They got it all wrong. they say, Jesus, will you do what we want? I mean that's a bad start.

And then they ask the question, when Jesus says, well what would you like me to do for you? I mean you might like to ask yourself that question.

If Jesus said to you, what do you want me to do for you? What kind of answer would you give him? lottery ticket numbers?

Deal with somebody who's been a pain in the neck to me? Help me get rid of the partner of yours who's related. What would you ask?

[19 : 47] Here's the point. When they ask the disciples, the disciples ask an entirely self-centered question. we'd like one of us to sit on your right hand and one of us on your left hand when we get to glory.

They wanted position in a place where of all places position will no longer matter. doesn't sound like me that even those who've been with Jesus in his physical presence got it.

And I'm not clear today that churches get it. Your attitude, said Paul, should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

You ever thought about that? You probably think when you hear that, no, no, no, you know what, he was the son of God, give me a break. But no, Paul says your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

Then, who being in the very nature of God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing. You know what, that sounds like humility to me.

[21 : 21] He took 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.

I don't know about you, but when I read those words, if I had hair on my head, it would stand up at the moment.

I'm supposed to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus. And Jesus' hold on my life is meant to be such that though I'm saved by grace, I'm called to obedience that I might live the life that he has for me.

therefore, God exalted him.

You're not going to get a decent seat in heaven because there won't be any decent seats. They'll just be the presence of God.

[22 : 40] life entirely like any life that we can envisage. And that life is open and available to all who trust in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross of Calvary where he died for my sin and your sin.

sin. And until we get the idea that Jesus, who could have had an amazing life in heaven for eternity with God, was sent to earth to live like a man to humble himself and be obedient even unto death, until we get that, we might try our hardest with humility.

But humility doesn't begin with your words, it begins in your heart. I hope you get this. So fundamental and so easy to trip up over.

You know, I could give you countless stories of the stumbling blocks I've tripped over in my life.

What a different world we would live in.

What a different world you could create around yourself. If you just did those two things that Paul says at the beginning of chapter 2, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

[24 : 08] You could start that this week. Right? You could start today. If you're going to see somebody today who's down below in your pecking order, you could try and start to think of them as better than you.

Why would you do that? Because we're called to love each other. I don't remember anywhere in the Bible where it says, love one another, but only those who you like.

In fact, I remember one of the most counter intuitive sections of teaching is when Jesus says, love your enemies. I mean, hands up if you find that really easy, but you could be forgiven.

I saw somebody move their hand and they're scratching their head. Listen, this is core truth, core reality.

humanity. Jesus could have had a heck of a problem for existence in heaven with his father, but he chose to come to earth, to live in the mess of our humanity.

[25 : 31] And you don't have to look too far, do you, to feel the mess that humanity is in at the moment. came and dwelt amongst us and was prepared to go to a cross in order that my limitedness, my innate self-centeredness can be transformed and I can be changed.

The old hymn puts it from glory into glory. You know, I stand here saying this in front of you and part of me thinks, who the heck wouldn't want that?

What kind of mind would they have if they were turned down on the basis that all this comes to us, not through our effort, but through the grace of God? God, why wouldn't you want it?

Why wouldn't you want the life that he who created you and the earth and the heavens and all that therein is, has a life for you to lead, which will bring you more fullness than any other life.

life. John 10, verse 10, I have come that you may have life and have it in all its fullness. Who wouldn't want fullness? Incidentally, fullness of life is not the same as a full life.

[27 : 04] A lot of people who live full lives are just running away from something. no, Jesus, by fullness of life, means a quality of life which you will only find through him.

And Jesus said to his disciples, you remember the kind of funny touch in the New Testament about this, in Mark's Gospel, it's the sons of Zebedee, James and John, who come and ask for this stupid request to sit at his right hand and one at his left.

In the other versions, it's the mother of James and John who come. I think it's the first biblical example of a really pushy mum. Jesus says, I can't do that for you.

It's not my job. And the reason it's not my job is I'm not even going to answer requests like that. If you trust Christ, if you are, as Paul would say, in Christ, then God wants you to live the life that he has for you.

[28 : 29] And these few weeks we've been talking about the kind of character that we're supposed to have to bear testimony to that life. Humility is foundational.

Maybe some of us need to think again. Always think of others as better than yourselves and go and attend the interests of others before you attend your own interests.

interests. What a different world it would be if only we got that basic message. The trouble is the message on its own is not enough.

It's non-natural behavior for us to be like that. So God has supplied us with the Holy Spirit who has power to change us from the inside out. you know when Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit he didn't talk about the froth at the top of the bottle.

He talked about the real Jews beneath. He said when the Spirit comes the Spirit will teach you. He'll call to mind the things that I have told you.

[29 : 43] If you can't take feedback think again. If you can't even listen to people who disagree with you think again.

If you have a pecking order which even now is running at maximum speed trying to work out well who are the people I look up to and who are the people I look up to. Take the script and rip it up. Because while you hold things like that you will never be humble. I mean you can put on a show of humility. God requires those who have a humble heart.

The sacrifice of God said the psalmist is a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart. He will never turn away from.

Come Holy Spirit teach us. Show us. Rebuke us. Call us. Do anything you like with my life in order that I might be an obedient disciple who is even prepared to be obedient unto death.

[31 : 08] death. Reminds me of that amazing thing that Bon Affer wrote. He said when Christ calls a person he bids them come and die.

Die to themselves selfishness. Humility is a winsome quality.

You see that reading we had in there when the other disciples heard that James and John had come with this ridiculous request they were indignant. proud people boastful people are nearly always difficult to live alongside.

There are very few people who are boastful and big headed who we want to be like them. And if you do come to the prayer team at the end.

No this is core truth. Go home read Philippians 2. Go to work. Go to wherever you go in these other six days of the week. And try thinking like this.

[32 : 29] I will think of others as better than myself. And I will seek the interests of others before my own. And even if you know in your heart you're not too humble today, humility will start to take root in your soul and you become more like the person Jesus wants you to be.

Not so with you. Pray God that in the church those words might be true. That we live the life that is not so with the rest of the world.

But the life God in Jesus Christ in the power of his Holy Spirit has given to us. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we're very conscious that humility in our culture today is a pretty rare commodity. humility. And Lord, we can't spot arrogance, big-headedness, hubris in others.

But Lord, I pray this morning that you would show us where we need to make running adjustments to our lives. Lord, we know that in our own strength we can achieve nothing of lasting spiritual value.

[34 : 13] But Lord, as we receive the nudges and the whisper of your Holy Spirit in our ears, we pray that you will give us the strength to be the people that you want us to be.

So, Father, we ask now, come, Holy Spirit. Come into our lives, Lord, and recognizing that Jesus surrendered all to be obedient to you.

We dare to stand up this morning in this church, February the 8th, 2026, and say from our heart, I surrender all.
Come, Holy Spirit, fill our hearts with your love and your humility and your obedience.
peace with who agreed, said together. Amen.