Walking with Jesus in Lent: Walking in humility

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[0:00] I mentioned earlier that I've been away at the SU Edinburgh Schools Weekend Camp this weekend.

! I just wanted to share that Kirk gave me permission to buy some youth bibles a few weeks ago. I took some with me to this camp and I'm very delighted to be able to say that I was able to give five young people a Bible who had no Bible or in the case of one young guy the most ancient looking King James Version Bible I've ever seen.
I just wanted to share that with you because as Alison was saying in her prayer there's this growth of interest in reading God's Word these young people were so keen to get a Bible for themselves and to be able to take it home.
One young guy from a family of people who are really allowing them to go to church but are quite hostile to the whole idea of it. So he's able to go home with a Bible thanks to all of you and so I'm thankful to the Kirk session for allowing me to do that and just to share a little bit about what's going on and a little bit of the fruit of that.
And while I was there I met a young guy who lives near here called Matthew and I'm only mentioning it because he astonished me by saying he downloads our sermons and listens to them.
[1:29] And I had a few good chats with him and that guy knows his Bible and his theology. He bamboozled all of us with his questions. So I just mention it because I want to say hello to Matthew if you're listening.

So let's now begin our service by sharing our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher and your great glory our supreme concern through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
I read a book recently called Why We Get the Wrong Politicians. I know that's what I thought when I read it as well. And this is about how easy it is for some people to be selected as a candidate for a political party and why it's much more difficult for some others.
And the writer of the book said that some people having involvement in local parties from a young age, continuing their involvement through university and studying politics, then working for a political party and going on to be an advisor to someone in government.
And this meant they had a much better chance of being selected than someone who had worked in a job or profession and gained lots of experience and then later decided to enter politics feeling that they have something to offer.
[2:57] These people have no patronage and find it difficult to get noticed. And that's laying aside the shocking amounts of money that it costs an individual to try and get themselves on the list for selection.

And the balance of power is so badly unbalanced. And so the author of the book I was reading contends that we end up getting the wrong politicians. Those who are selected have almost all come through the same system.
And she says those with the patronage, they know they have the power and quite enjoy it. A good book, kind of depressing, but a good book. Now it might not seem at first, but the two stories that Alison read for us earlier are about power.
The two might not seem so at first because in the first story it seems obvious who has power, but which would most likely be in our mind the Pharisees.
The Pharisees were important people in that society. They were considered the most pious people in Palestinian Jewish society, though I think mostly maybe just by themselves.
[4:08] They imposed strict rules over who should have access to the temple. And that list would most certainly not have included tax collectors.

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One person described the Pharisees as rigorists for the Torah, which of course are the first five books of their scriptures, which we know as our Old Testament. These five books contain all the laws and practices that God laid down for the nation as a people set apart for him and to be a light for the nations.
And it's fair to say that the Pharisees liked the good rule, so much so that they added lots of extra rules that placed terrible burdens on the ordinary people. Jesus tackles them head on in Matthew 23.
At the start of that chapter, he says, don't follow their example, meaning the Pharisees, for they don't practice what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease their burden.
Jesus then goes on in this chapter, such a powerful chapter, declaring seven distinct woes and exposing the Pharisees' hypocrisy. Woe for shutting the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.
[5:24] Woe to you blind guides, neglecters of justice and mercy, and so on and so on, as you read through that chapter. And again in Mark 7, Jesus shines a light on a practice they invented, the Pharisees invented, which allowed them to get round obligations to their parents.

Now the tax collector had power of one sort, since he had the considerable power of the Roman occupiers to collect taxes on their behalf.
And tax collectors were particularly despised, not only by the Pharisees, absolutely no one liked them. These were Jewish people who collected taxes, for they also despised Roman invaders.
And as we know from the story of Zacchaeus, which we're going to be looking at sometime later this month, they stole from people as well. They were required by the Romans to collect a certain amount, but in most cases collected much more just to enrich themselves.
The Romans were aware of this practice, but they didn't care as long as they got what they wanted.
But the tax collector in this parable had no power in the temple.
[6:33] He had no standing, would have received no welcome, and as we'll see just now, the contrasting postures between the two men showed that he knew it. First of all though, what was the posture of the Pharisee?

The Pharisee standing by himself prayed thus, God I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust adulterers, or even like this tax collector.
I fast twice a week, I give tithes on all that I get. The Pharisee's prayer is so loaded with self-congratulation, it can hardly raise itself off the ground.
It's clear that he sees himself as having arrived in the area of righteousness, and his intention is for everyone to know it. His prayer includes the words thank you, but he wasn't thankful to God at all for anything that God had done in his life.
Rather, he rejoiced in the way that he was different from others. His prayer is also a boast. A fast twice a week gives tithes on all he gets. The requirement of the law at that time was to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement.
[7:42] Other days of fasting had become custom, but weren't part of the law of Moses. Also tithes were required from your income, but the Pharisee's also tithed a tenth of everything they bought, even though the person who grew the food or whatever it happened to be that they bought had already tithed it according to the law.

So in other words, they went way above and beyond so that they could appear more righteous than everyone else. They went looking for ways to sacrifice so that they could later point to themselves.
There didn't seem to be a sense of devotion to God as a motivation for their actions. And now let's compare that to the posture of the tax collector.
The tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Instead of standing in a prominent position as the Pharisee seems to have done, the tax collector is said to have stood far off.
This suggests tucking himself into a corner where he couldn't be seen. Because what he had come to the temple to do was to cry out for God's mercy, and he didn't want or need an audience for that.
[8:53] There are a couple of interesting details here in Jesus' story. First of all, the tax collector wouldn't lift his eyes up. In many places in the scriptures we read that people are encouraged to lift up their eyes when praising or seeking God.

Psalm 21 says, I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. The psalm is saying if you need help from God, and the tax

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collector certainly did, then lift up your eyes.
But the tax collector was so abject that he couldn't even do that. The other thing associated with lifting up our eyes to him was a plea for God's mercy. His honest and anguished cry rings to mind. David's equally honest and anguished plea in Psalm 51. You'll remember perhaps that David had sinned by committing adultery and having Uriah killed to cover it up.
Nathan the prophet pointed this sin out to him, and he poured out his sorrow in Psalm 51. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.
[9:58] For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. This is such a good picture of the tax collector as he bears his soul to God in the temple.

And the second detail is that he beat his breast. And this, as we read all the way through the Old Testament, a very familiar image of sorrow and dismay and contrition. In portraying these two characters in this parable, Jesus could not have shown us two more opposite people or two more opposite attitudes.
And now let's contrast that to what Jesus says in Matthew 5, verses 5 and 6. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they might be seen by others.
Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, shut the door and pray to your father who is in secret.
And your father who is in secret will reward you. What Jesus is describing here is the complete opposite of what the Pharisee is doing. Now, we do need to bear in mind that this is a story, it's a parable.
[11:10] This isn't an actual event that Jesus witnessed. But it must have come from Jesus' experience of seeing Pharisees in the temple and of their practices. And he's comparing this Pharisee's behaviour in prayer with what he taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

And I think it's clear to see that the Pharisee doesn't come out well. But the tax collectors not sought attention and would just be left alone to pray if the Pharisee hadn't pointed him out in this story.
And the danger of spiritual pride is obvious here. It's easy for us to see it. And our sympathies in this parable are always with the tax collector. And that's the way Jesus told the story.
I think spiritual pride must be a stealthy sin that enters unawares. Because I'm sure the idea of being prideful like that would be abhorrent to us.
And we know the Bible talks a lot about humility. Gordon mentioned last week that humility was a theme that went all the way through our services as we looked at the theme of walking with Jesus in Luke 8 and 9.
[12:19] In a few weeks time we're going to be celebrating Palm Sunday. And we'll remember the prophecy in Zechariah. Which says the king was coming to you humble and riding on a donkey.

So as well as being blind to sin arising from spiritual pride. We can also be blind to even being in our lives. And that leads to our reliance on us rather than on God.
And rightly we do like the idea of our hard work having brought about benefits to our lives. And the Bible is positive about hard work. But it's not positive about the idea of complete self-reliance.
There's a saying, you might have heard it. God helps those who help themselves. People think that sounds like something we read in the Bible. But of course it doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible.
It's actually from Greek philosophy. Which I had to look that one up. In fact the Bible teaches complete reliance on God. Trust in the Lord with all your heart.
[13:20] Lean not on your own understanding. As we read in Proverbs 3. So as followers of Jesus, reliance on ourselves is a human and not a biblical idea. God helps those who depend on Him, trust Him and seek His mercy.

But Jesus said the tax collector was the one who went home justified. So let's think a little bit about why that was. Instead of spiritual pride, He demonstrated honest repentance.
His prayer in contrast to the Pharisee was simple. God be merciful to me a sinner. He approached God not from a self-perceived position of strength.
But one of powerlessness and weakness. All that mattered to Him was God and His mercy. And there's a simplicity in this example that reminds us that prayer is always just us and God's mercy.
And this will link nicely to the next part of our story where Jesus places the little children who are brought to Him. And we're just going to return to that in a minute. But we've already seen that Jesus taught us that lots of words and high-minded phrases are not required in prayer.

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[14:32] Now perhaps they're helpful for some and that's absolutely fine of course. But they're not essential. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Jesus closed this parable saying, I tell you this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.
The Pharisee left as he had arrived, full of himself. The tax collector arrived in humility and left full of God and His mercy.
This is what we are to be careful to guard against. Rather than walk in pride and superiority and find ourselves far from God, we want to walk in humility and in God's presence.
The next section of our passage is, I hope we'll find, connected to this parable. There we go.
[15:34] There we go, that's right, sorry. One day some parents brought their little children to Jesus so He could touch and bless them. When the disciples saw this, they scolded the parents for bothering Him. Then Jesus called for the children and said to the disciples, Let the children come to me.

Don't stop them. For the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth. Anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.
Children had very little status in that society. In fact, someone said they were not much higher on the social scale than tax collectors. Although, of course, not despised.
Not despised, but not at all important. And certainly no rabbi would bother himself with them. Like the cynical politician who doesn't mind offending a certain segment of society because he knows fine that they were never going to vote for him anyway.
Rabbis had very little to do with children in the course of their work, teaching and instructing adults who didn't generally bother with them. But Jesus was different.
[16:43] And don't you think we could say that about so many stories we read in the Gospels? Jesus was different with the people that everyone avoided. He didn't just spout rules, but taught transformation of the heart.

He did not seek power or wealth or status, but was a servant. He responded to hate with love and prayed for those who harmed him. And his reaction to the children who the disciples tried to shoo away was also different.
Jesus had already astonished people by saying the tax collector, not the Pharisee, had gone home righteous. And now he was going to astonish them again by saying that anyone who doesn't receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.
The disciples were trying to be gatekeepers, keep unimportant people away from Jesus. Now all this took place in the run up to Palm Sunday. The disciples have been with Jesus for around three years.
They have seen him concern himself with everyone their society rejected. All the poor, downtrodden, looked down on people that the so-called better people shunned completely and felt superior to you.
[17:57] By this time we might imagine the disciples had learned that Jesus didn't work that way. But in trying to prevent the children from coming to Jesus, we can see that they still had a bit to learn.

It wasn't that children were especially worthy of entering into the kingdom of God because of their youth and innocence. We all know that children can do wrong. But perhaps they hadn't had time to develop that feeling of spiritual self-righteousness, on which they base what they have done and what they have accomplished.
And the sense of entitlement and good opinion that can lead to not an inferiority complex, but a superiority complex. Jesus pointed to the children as an example precisely because they had no status.
They came to Jesus in trust and dependence with nothing to stand on and no credentials to proffer. And that's how we stand before Jesus, with nothing but his love to rely on.
We don't bring anything to Jesus, but he gave everything for us so that we could know him and be known by him. We can't earn our salvation through our own importance or by anything we've achieved, because it's already freely given to us.
[19:16] We enter God's kingdom like a child accepting a gift with open hands, not with handfuls of our own merit. So we're free to approach God in prayer, with honesty and confession, with

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thankfulness and with daily dependence on his grace.

An unconditional grace which is abundantly given by a loving, patient, forgiving God. Steady, strong, faithful and near.
Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Thank you Lord that all we need is Jesus. And that Jesus has done all we need to know you and to know your love and acceptance.
Help us to live lives full of grace and thankfulness for all you have done. And may we shine the light of that love into the lives of the people around us. In Jesus name.
Amen. Continue our worship by singing together the hymn, Before the Throne of God above.

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