

Keep On Growing: Humility - 4th June 2023

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] After a little hiatus last week, we had a Sunday off mainly because of the kitchen and so on. We're back on track with our Keep on Growing series today, exploring the ways in which we might be able to mature in and deepen our faith journey with God and with each other.

And we're talking about growth because it's a concept which is at the heart of our faith. God's ideal for us being that we're meant to be getting better as people and becoming more like Jesus.

A work in progress, yeah, for sure. But ideally a growing, improving work in progress. Nevertheless, the posh religious word if you're into these kind of things for this kind of growth is sanctification.

Sanctification, the ways in which we and others can see the positive difference that God's Spirit is making in our lives and the way we live. So how are you feeling today?

You're feeling sanctified. Can I get an amen? Yeah, okay. Ooh, there's some positivity there. I like that one. Some, yep, going for it. Good. Something different.

[1 : 1 1] Some shrugs. Some shakes of the head, I imagine. I guess we'd all feel at sort of different stages on this sanctification journey, which is probably about right. Because from one day to the next, I imagine we'll all be feeling differently.

Some days, you know, our best days, I imagine, we'll feel like, yeah, we are making some progress. You know, not in a smug way, but in a grateful way for what God's doing in our lives.

Whereas other days, maybe more days than perhaps we might have envisaged or hoped for. We might feel like sometimes we're standing still, or even that we're sometimes regressing, you know, that old one step forward, two step back kind of thing in our journey with God.

And I guess on those sort of lowest kind of days, when we're feeling like that, I imagine this series probably may not be the easiest one for us to think about. Like the whole idea of growth, it might feel like a distant prospect, even an unwelcome pressure when we're just not feeling it.

Perhaps when we're tired and moody and would rather just curl up on the sofa, having a drink, eating Maltesers and watching Netflix. You know, that might be on our agenda. If that's you, and sometimes that is me, the good news is that when Jesus talks about growth, I think he gets the need to be gentle with us in that.

[2 : 3 9] Indeed, what's fascinating, I think, is that when Jesus tells stories and parables about growth, which he does all the time, he invariably starts with something very small, very small, inviting us to make small steps.

We might even say baby steps towards this goal of sanctification, this goal of living life God's way. For example, one of the most comforting pictures I think Jesus paints about what living life God's way looks like is when he compares it to a seed, a mustard seed, no less, one of the smallest seeds around.

But, says Jesus, as small as that seed is, in other words, as insignificant as we and our efforts might sometimes feel, when that seed is planted and nurtured by God, it grows into a mighty, impressive tree.

Now, that tree, says Jesus, is big enough for birds to come and perch on its branches. Again, in other words, that goodness that God enables in us enables others through us to find rest and refreshment.

See, in God's economy, even our smallest wins, even our tiny acts of kindness, our gestures of generosity, our smiles of sympathy and so on, we might like to think of them all as mustard seeds from which God produces something bigger, something better than we could ever have imagined.

[4 : 20] What's interesting, though, is that in comparison, when Jesus encounters people who feel pretty satisfied with themselves, brimming with confidence that they're doing well in life and doing great things, Jesus takes an altogether different approach with them.

For example, here's a little clip, a little reading from Luke's Gospel, where Jesus shares his opinion of some of the teachers of the law in his day.

While all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples, Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.

They devour widows' houses and, for a show, make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.

Oh, that guy's look at the end there. He feels chastened by that.

[5 : 37] Jesus doesn't mince his words there at all. They devour widows' houses. That is a harsh phrase to level at anyone, and yet it comes from Jesus.

I think it's words which underline Jesus' displeasure with those who think they've made it and yet treat others with disdain, you know, especially when it's done by those who might claim to be representing God in that or who use their position of power to bully or abuse others.

Indeed, the starkness of Jesus' words there, I appreciate it was brief, but there was a starkness to them. Words against the arrogant there, I suppose. As I say, they're in marked contrast to the way he talks about those who instead don't feel cocky but feel poor in spirit.

Those who feel as if their life amounts to not much more than a mustard seed. Those are the people, says Jesus, who I will bless, who will be first in my kingdom.

So how might we summarize perhaps the difference between these two types of people? Well, I guess the word we could use would be humility.

[6 : 53] Humility. In fact, time and again, we see Jesus commending humility in people. So, the humility of the bleeding woman who feels unable to approach Jesus face to face for his healing and instead touches just the hem of his robe.

You've got the humility, Kim mentioned it earlier in her prayers. The widow who puts just a couple of copper coins into the temple collection but who Jesus commends as giving more than anyone.

Equally, you've got the humility of someone like the centurion who doesn't deem himself worthy to ask Jesus to come to his house and heal his servant but whose servant Jesus does indeed heal from afar having commended the centurion's heartfelt faith.

And I imagine as you go through perhaps some of the gospel stories you can picture other characters too. Those who don't think more of themselves than they should and are instead simply open in their own humble way to receive Jesus' loving care.

Humility. Being humble. It's a quality and an approach to life which Jesus likes. He commends it as being key, it seems, to truly growing with him and with each other.

[8 : 13] A quality of life which Jesus can really work with. As he says in another bit in Luke, he says, For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

And yet I guess one of the problems with humility is that it's quite hard to measure. You know, especially in ourselves. I mean the moment we think we've got this humility thing cracked we're doomed because thinking we're humble is probably the height of arrogance.

You know, it's not like you can put on your CV my greatest quality is humility. You know, it doesn't work that kind of way. So thinking about growth, how do we grow in humility without losing the very thing that we're aiming for?

Well, I think there's a clue in the word humility itself. The English word humility, it comes from a Latin word, hummus or hummus.

Not the chickpea dip which is very nice and leaves you pretty windy but instead it's a word, this hummus, hummus Latin word which means earth or ground.

[9 : 27] And so the idea is that humility is associated with being lowly. Lowly. Not in terms of identity but in terms of status.

You know, not elevating ourselves above others or trying to stand out from the crowd. The Hebrew word that we translate in our Bibles as humility is this one, anava.

Anava. Anava or anava. Hebrew is not great with me but you'll find your own pronunciation of that I'm sure. But it's a word which literally means to occupy your God-given space in the world.

That's what humility means. To occupy your God-given space in the world. And I like that as an expression because it's a way of saying don't overestimate yourself or your abilities but don't underestimate them either.

We're to be ourselves. You know, not thinking of ourselves as worthless and miserable worms and all that kind of stuff because that demeans the uniqueness of the person we are.

[10 : 42] It demeans the uniqueness of the person God loves. But equally, we're not thinking of ourselves as better than others because that in turn will demean them whilst also limiting perhaps our ability to rely on God ourselves.

Instead, humility is about being ourselves. It's about being yourself. Occupying your God-given space in the world. And so if we will be sort of multilingual this morning and put the Latin and the Hebrew together and define humility as perhaps occupying our God-given ground in the world, thinking on that lowly kind of thing, then I think that ties in with the idea of God planting us as a seed in the ground.

You know, we may well be or we may well feel small and lowly and unglamorous but we're nevertheless a seed with huge potential who can, with God's care and guidance, grow into something which ends up being a haven for others.

And so how might we stay grounded? How might we stay lowly and humble in life? Well, one way which I've been reminded of about over recent days, I think, is how important it is for us to say sorry and to be honest about our failings.

For example, let's talk about this guy, Philip Schofield. Now, we don't need to go in and I don't want to go into the details of whatever he's done.

[12 : 27] I mean, bloomin' heck, the media have relentlessly raked over all of that for sure in the last couple of weeks. And the consequences of his actions will affect those involved, I'm sure, for the rest of their lives.

But there are two things which have struck me with this story, really. Firstly, I think, if we speak as we find and take his recent interview with the BBC on face value, he's obviously hugely sorry for what he's done.

Indeed, have a listen to these words. It's what he says. He says, what am I going to do with my days? I see nothing ahead of me but blackness and sadness and regret and remorse and guilt.

I did something very wrong and then I lied about it consistently. Those to me, they sound like words of a man who's been utterly humbled and brought down low.

We could say lower because of the media coverage than it's probably safe for anyone's mental health to have been taken. That's one thing that struck me.

[13 : 42] But secondly, I was struck by the words of his colleague from this morning, a woman called Alison Hammond, who had this to say on Friday this week.

It's really painful because obviously, you know, I loved Philip Schofield and it's weird because I still love Philip Schofield. However, what he's done is wrong.

He's admitted it. He's said sorry. But I'm really, I mean, as a family, we're all really struggling to process everything and I'd never know what to say but I remember what my mum said.

My mum always said, you know, use your Bible as you're sat now in life, Al. And in the Bible, it says, he without sin cast the first stone and I just don't want to, I don't want to say anything bad because obviously, I'm in conflict.

Of course, of course. I think so many of them are. Yeah. Now, we could debate the wisdom of this morning, you know, perpetuating the story by them talking about it again but again, for Alison, her words to me seem genuine, you know, genuinely reflecting the conflicting emotions she feels but also genuine in her kind of tearful desire not to want to judge and good for her in that, I would say.

[15 : 05] Indeed, going on national TV and quoting Jesus in the face of all the press coverage that's been going on, now that humbles me, maybe that should humble us, bring us down to the ground a bit if we've been tempted to have judgmental opinions or gossiped about this story at all.

Indeed, those words she quoted of Jesus, you know, about casting the first stone, they come from the time when Jesus was dealing with an adulterous woman who was brought before him by the religious authorities.

You know, in many ways, the religious authorities were the tabloid press of their day who saw it as their moral duty to expose sin without regard for their own shortcomings or the well-being of those they were trying to shame.

You know, in that story, Jesus says, yeah, go and sin no more. Absolutely. But he also said he didn't condemn her.

I'll leave you to draw your own conclusions about what Jesus might say to Philip Schofield, but I'd also suggest we do well to allow Jesus to shape our own views on media stories as we've seen like this.

[16 : 22] It's one example which has struck me this week where sorrow and avoiding judgment demonstrate what humility might look like in action.

But then a second example is one which is close at home for me and I mentioned him in the prayers, concerns the treatment which my dad has been receiving up in Hull Hospital following the paralysis and then meningitis, infection in his spinal cord which has led to him having sepsis and all the complications which come with that.

It has been a hugely complicated and harrowing time for me and my mum and my sister and I think the week before last was probably the worst week of my life given all that was going on.

What made it particularly difficult though was that a registrar from the hospital made a pretty profound mistake in the way they were treating my dad.

A mistake which has caused us all as a family a lot of heartache and so on being told about this mistake my mum and my sister and I went in to meet with this registrar and a senior consultant really to demand some answers and an explanation and we had about an hour's meeting with them and it's weird when your dad's poorly I guess I kind of took the lead for us as a family with what needed to be said and I managed to stay calm but lack of sleep combined with the rollercoaster of emotions we'd already been through meant that inside I was so angry I was so angry and yet this registrar who I'd been unrelentingly staring out as I put my questions to him putting him on the spot he took responsibility and he apologised in that meeting he said

[18 : 26] I'm sorry I really made a mistake and I will learn from it and after letting all his words sink in for a few seconds it was as if something of the weight of the situation lifted because you could tell it took him considerable courage there's a considerable risk admitting liability but it took considerable humility for him to do that especially in front of a senior colleague indeed the way in which my anger was met not with defensiveness on his part but by humility well that was a pretty transforming experience really not because it changes my dad's situation because that remains pretty bleak but because it meant that when we finished that meeting having gone in angry as

I've ever been I think in my life when we finished that meeting I was able to thank him and I made a point of shaking his hand humility I would suggest does that humility not thinking more or less of ourselves than we should but occupying a God-given space in the world even if that means saying sorry for how we've messed up in that space well in its own way it's a gift which can bring healing and harmony indeed that registrar's humility helped stop me from taking the moral high ground his humility if you like brought me down low and for that I'm grateful I'm grateful you know mistakes happen human error in whatever walk of life it's part of life but I'd suggest it's humility that can help to diffuse anger or bitterness that might otherwise reside as a result of those mistakes and ultimately it's humility that helps other people to forgive and for such a seed-like lowly quality that's a pretty remarkable outcome

I think a mustard seed if you like that can grow into a tree on which the birds of the air can come and perch and make their home and so I wonder for you how might or how does humility shape your life how might the seed of humility take root and bring something good out in your life or in someone else's life humility this idea of not thinking more of ourselves than we should but not thinking less of ourselves either rather occupying our God given space in the world and so I wonder examples really I wonder perhaps humility means we stop trying to outdo or compete with those around us and instead learn to accept ourselves and others as they are perhaps humility means that we're more willing to do those little unseen jobs around the house or at work or in church because why shouldn't it be us who does those things and who knows what difference that example could make for someone else's journey and acceptance of humility perhaps humility means we ask for God's help to become less judgmental never cast in the first stone since we ourselves know that we're not without sin either indeed

I wonder this morning perhaps there are things we know we need to say sorry for to apologise to someone for the way we've treated them to come before them with our heads bowed low to approach someone with humility if so I imagine God might be bringing to mind those situations that are there their faces might come in our minds eye now who we know we need to apologise to apologies as I've seen this week they take courage they take humility but maybe today's the day to ask God to give us that courage and humility that we need to do just that equally though there could be people who we need to forgive forgiveness isn't contingent on people saying sorry to us we can still choose to forgive even when there's no remorse and that's certainly something that I need to get better at doing but perhaps there are people in your life who may have already humbled themselves by saying sorry to you and now maybe it's up to you to accept that apology in order to move towards being able to forgive them again if that's the case

I imagine there's a situation or people's faces perhaps who God might be bringing to mind right now the good news is in all of this is that humility is a gift which God longs to grow in us God is on our side he wants to help us to be humble people it's a quality and approach to life which he knows has the potential to transform the way we see the world and ourselves and God to see ourselves not more than we are not less than we are but as we are occupying the gift of the God given space the God given ground in which we live in this world some final words famous words from the prophet Micah he says this what does the Lord require of you is to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God as we occupy the space in which God has given us to live may God grow us from our humble seed like beginnings to be a tree in which others find rest and refreshment from God

[25 : 04] Amen empty large people are girls no race adepth■ tell us and not the trying it to be a H