

When I was in high school, I was this height, 165 lbs and awkward as a duck on stilts. I lived in a small town in SW Colorado called Durango where our high school mascot was the “demons.” In other words, the background-culture attitude towards Christianity was very different than it is here. And being a Christian, and concerned that every single one of my friends was definitely going to hell, I...argued, ferociously. I challenged students, teachers and pretty much anyone I could about every point I thought I could fight out. I mentally equated “having the right opinions” with “being right with God,” and by that definition I was fairly convinced that very few people around me were “right with God.”

You’ve probably guessed this by now, but today’s message is going to be a little different than usual. We blessed the graduates, and I’ve had something on my heart to say to the high schoolers for awhile now. Dennis was kind enough to let me speak today, and also he couldn’t get anybody else. (He tried 8 people!) Anyway, a little more different than usual: I am not theologically trained. This will necessarily be anecdotal and experiential. Also, I apologize for the lack of slides. I was not convinced that I could successfully read and push the clicky-button at the same time, you see.

Anyway! Learning this has changed my life. This is the one thing I most wish I understood when I was in high school. Honestly, I should go a step further. If I were to boil down the story God is telling in my life into one word, it would be the word that we’re going to talk about today.

So, high-schoolers and also everyone else! You’ve all certainly noticed by now that some people have a certain charisma, a certain confidence that gives them a tangible force of personality. I’d like to take a minute and ask just where that confidence comes from. I mean, if you have it, great—but what are you supposed to do if you don’t have it?

There are a couple of obvious possibilities here. One of them is that this type of forceful confidence is an inherent trait, like your height or eye color. If you’re born with it, good for you, and if not, too bad. It’s pretty much exactly like that noted theologian Michael Jordan said, “the meek shall inherit the Earth—but they won’t get the ball.” And it’s the model I was living out in my story: I was terrible at sports, but I was decent at debating. Guess which one I tried to “glorify Christ” with?

Another possibility is that self-confidence is like a muscle to exercise, like you believe more and more in yourself and then you get better and better at believing in yourself. I was raised with this model, too—not so much from my parents, but definitely from the surrounding culture. Way back in the cold dark 1990s, we actually heard a lot of talk about “self-esteem.” The thinking went that if you build up your belief in yourself, then that confidence you want would follow. Just keep practicing, juuuust keeeeeeep practicing...

The problem with both is that neither of these work! Not really. Both of these approaches will give you a boost to confidence, at least temporarily, sure. But both are ultimately toxic because both are ultimately wrong. What I mean by that is, neither of these are how God made us to live. The latter option, choosing to just practice believing that you’re great, or at least better

than you thought, is only a temporary balm, and ultimately a brittle and fearful one. There's always someone richer, smarter or luckier, always. Trying to convince yourself that you're just great, or just better than whatever's going on around you? Past a certain point, you're just practicing self-deception. That never ends well.

And the former option, just believing that you're in some blessed state that should escape all self-doubt? It reminds me of a dark-hearted WW2 joke: rookie pilot says to veteran pilot, I can't tell the friendlies from the enemy. Veteran pilot says, "Oh that's easy, if you hit them it was an enemy."

Taken far enough, this type of thinking is ultimately a dangerous type of madness. We all live our lives with some uncertainty; any other view on the point is a lie. This is where this message does in fact tie in to Dennis' series, because God made us with the capacity to doubt, and we need doubt to not fall into insanity. To believe that your actions are the right ones because you're the one who made them is if nothing else a deeply unwise place to be. Either type of "confidence" will ultimately require a never-ending process of self-inflation, as each act and display of "confidence" naturally brings its own counter-argument to mind.

Instead, I'd ask you to consider the idea that *true* confidence, the kind of confidence that you can take anywhere you go, no matter what you face, comes from, and is fed by, humility.

The reason for this has to do with what the source of our confidence really is. When the source of our confidence is ourselves, we'll be fine up until we aren't any more. When you reach the end of yourself - and spoiler alert, you will - then what do you do? When you set your heart towards humility, though, you set your heart towards Christ—and you become able to draw on his strength when yours isn't enough. I am convinced that humility is the foundation that Paul builds on when he says in Philippians that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

To pick another passage, James 4:6 quotes the Old Testament when he says "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." I know it's a quote because it shows up in small caps in my Bible, but there's a fun snag here: where is it quoting, exactly? My Bible points to Proverbs 3, but there's at least seven similar verses in Psalms, Proverbs and Isaiah. Isaiah 57:15 says:

"The high and lofty one who lives in eternity,  
the Holy One, says this:  
"I live in the high and holy place  
with those whose spirits are contrite and humble.  
I restore the crushed spirit of the humble  
and revive the courage of those with repentant hearts."

In other words, humility...lifts us up to God's high and holy place? I haven't studied the language enough to confirm that—but it's a pretty safe bet that God cares about whether we're proud or humble.

At its core, humility is a type of self-honesty. We live our lives perched at the top of these amazing piles of blessings that we had no control over. My first job out of college was working with kids with cystic fibrosis at DeVos Children's Hospital. I mean it when I say that I had no control over whether I was born healthy. I have no control over the vast majority of the biological functions that make me still-alive! Breathing, seeing, hearing, thinking, talking to you now. There's a very real place where humility is just allowing the truth of our lives into our heads.

So! We accept the reality we're created in, and over time we get access to the moral reserves of God, far beyond what any human is capable of. Hmm. What might that look like? If you can truly set yourself aside, if you can be rich or poor, eat gourmet or junk, take compliments or insults or live through success or failure with the same happy grin on your face, you can do *anything*. You can tell the mighty what they don't want to hear, you can ask the pretty girl out, you can make great or terrible art with equal enthusiasm, you can succeed or fail visibly, you can quietly work at the same job for years...none of it affects the "real you," your heart identity before the Lord, because you've removed the needs of your identity from the equation.

More than that, though, the mighty can tell *you* what *you* don't want to hear, you can learn from your failures and properly enjoy your successes, you can grow from the reason the pretty girl wouldn't go out with you (instead of just being crushed by it). You can gain real value out of quietly working the same unimpressive job for years. If you pursue humility, you can go practically anywhere at all with a smile on your face and a song in your heart.

And those "mighty," the powerful and the frightening and the wealthy and the vengeful? They can hurt you, they can kill you but *they can't own your soul*. When you get out of your own way, set your sense of identity aside and focus on everyone and everything around you, only then do you find your real soul, your real loves and passions. In fact, what you find is every single facet of that self-esteem, that confidence in yourself that you were supposed to just *have*... or not have. When you're out of your own way, you are free to be your real self.

So, here it is. The lesson I most wished I had learned when I was in high school was the value of humility. And the word that I would distill the love story that my heavenly Father is telling in my life down to is "humility." How desperately I need it at every level, in every direction and in every context I can imagine being in.

Humility is the only way I know of to find our blind spots. We need humility to accept that we might be wrong, that we have room to learn, that we're incomplete. We need humility to accept not knowing, not having all the answers, not being the expert or the authority. We need humility to embrace the truth that we don't know what we don't know, and in so doing embrace learning from those who know more than we do.

And we need humility to really hear from people who see what we don't see. I've never been black! I've never been gay, or Japanese, or an Estonian children's television animator. I've

never even been outside of North America!. The world is full of people like us with natures like ours, who see things so very differently than we do. Humility lets us learn from them, instead of merely judging them.

Humility is a moral ideal. It's not something anyone ever actually achieves. It's not like you can get a high score in it or anything. Frankly, the first sign of humility is someone's ability to get past themselves, to simply not worry about their presence in a given conversation.

Humility is a choice, but a tricky one. It's not something that any of us ever grow towards "naturally" or "accidentally." A life lived morally is lived deliberately; a life growing in humility is deliberately pursuing it. This is what makes it a tricky choice: in pursuing it, you need to set aside that you're pursuing it. After all, plenty of people call themselves humble (in their inner monologue if nothing else) which is pretty much the exact opposite of actual humility. Actual humility simply and quietly puts everyone else ahead of yourself--and there is no substitute for it.

Humility is not endless self-debasement or self-deprecation. People who spend all their time talking about how bad they are at things are not displaying humility--like C.S. Lewis said, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." (That type of endless self-deprecation can be a type of veiled pride, in fact.) Humility is ultimately freeing, but it is not a freedom from personal boundaries, either--the humble have a keen awareness of their own limitations, having deliberately embraced them. Humility means giving the people around you not just the emotional attention you think they deserve, but *as much emotional attention as you should give them before the Lord*.

Humility is not weakness. Healthy boundaries create positions of strength, because you know what you are and aren't able and willing to do. I want to repeat: a humble person actively embraces their limitations. When a humble person hits a place where they can and will push back, they're *unmoveable*.

Humility is the *only* sure-fire way to be impervious to humiliation. Lots of people try to buttress their pride to the point where they can't look stupid, and they're doomed because they're human. We are human, and God knows our natures better than we do. No matter how much you work out, sometimes you still have to fart in an elevator, and no matter how healthy you eat, you still have to poop.

I am, among other things, a "failed actor." I took a shot at professional acting lessons, and then I failed to get any parts anywhere, and then I didn't want to live my life around that any more, and then I became a failed actor. Still, my first professional acting class set the tone for me pretty hard. The class was expensive, and it was stressful. I was surrounded by all these literal models and former models, many of whom came from money, and my dorky self - awkward, t-shirt with comedy slogan, sandals - I stood out like, well, like a computer nerd surrounded by models. It would just figure that I was a couple minutes late to the first class, too.

And it had to be nerves, but as soon as I sat down, my stomach started gurgling, loudly and nonstop. Bulahbulahbulahbulah It was like whale calls! I know the others could hear it because they gave me these quick sideways glances, at first startled, but then sympathetic, then amused, and then eventually irritated. Bulahbulahbulahbulah I felt like dying.

Now, the acting coach was deliberately abrasive to a degree difficult to briefly describe. He wanted us flustered, not to mention terrified of him, and I think he pegged me as a target early and hard. So he called me up to do the first reading of the class, and I was so flustered by him and by my gut sonata that I gave the worst reading of my life. I did this commercial, I can't even remember what it was for, but I just wanted it to end. And then he had me sit back down and he said, "That was about as bad as it gets." He spent the entire rest of that class, a solid half-hour, just using me as an example of what not to do for the rest of the class. I lasted there about six months, Goofus to everyone else's Gallant, and like I said, eventually I lost interest in the whole thing.

So this was a dream of mine at the time. I saved up money I didn't really have for this class, and I kept pushing myself to go back but my heart was never really in it again. It hurt, y'know, but after it's over and there's no more reason to let it weigh you down, what do you do with this? Do I get mad? Mad at what? Mad at God? I had no divine right to being an actor. And besides, I quit—it was tough but there was nothing forcing me to quit, I chose to. It just hurt, and it wasn't something that went away quickly.

I tell you all of this to say: the ability to embrace and laugh at the absurdities of our humanity isn't just an enjoyable gift. It is crucial to having a happy and successful life in the human condition. I wish it wasn't so, but you will take hits. Hard hits. You have taken hits, and you will take more. Sometimes it will feel like life is testing you to the core. But Proverbs 24:16a says, "a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again." Hmm. What does that say about righteousness? And how do we get there?

We've talked at length about the effect humility has on you, but what about the effect your humility has on others? Humility is vital to the skill of *listening well*, to be able to really hear what someone means and where they're coming from when they say it. Do you ever wish someone would really *get* you in the way you most need them to, when you need them to? If so, then imagine how it would feel for you to provide that sense for those around you? After all, we're here to be the body of Christ, to live and speak and be the people Christ would be in that situation. It's our job to make the world around us be the place we would want to be in.

So at this point you might be saying to yourself, "Okay, so what do I actually do here?!?" It's true that humility is a slippery virtue to pursue. Like I said, simply claiming to be humble is pretty much the exact opposite of the intended effect, which I keep proving by telling my coworkers that I'm twice as humble as any of those jerks.

For those of you who were hoping for a three-point sermon, we get a three-point sermon, yay!

Step 1! The first step is also both the simplest and the most important: you ask God for humility. I have known strong Christians who held themselves up at this step, convinced that if they asked God for humility, what they would receive from God on the point was just a wave of humiliation. (Which is ironic, because I'm convinced that humility is the only way to be immune to humiliation.)

Please, trust in your heavenly Father who loves you and commit to this step. After all, it is not "we" who began the good work in you that will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus, but "he" who began the good work in you. More than some other virtues, we really need God to lead the way on this one.

Step 1 was to pray for humility, and now Step 2 is what I call the "petty honesty" prayer. This one feels unusual until you get used to it. But I want to talk about it because I have found it to be an important tool in my "prayer toolbox." You need to put your worst self forward in prayer. You need to put your pettiest, meanest and most unlikeable thoughts on full display before almighty God.

This is where we get as inane and ridiculous as we are. This is where we bring the things to God that we know full well shouldn't bother us, but do. Or that we know full well that we were in the wrong over, but we're mad anyway. Or that we just plain would never admit the truth of to anyone, ever, for any reason. Ever. This is, in other words, where we get real. We are humans, made in God's image for his glory, and we are vain, ridiculous creatures given to vain, ridiculous pursuits. God has seen us driving our cars and God has seen us online; I promise that he will not be shocked by our revelations in prayer.

After all, the purpose of this prayer isn't to inform God of anything He doesn't already know. The purpose of this type of prayer is for you to choose to be free of your pride in the presence of a heavenly father that loves you desperately, all of you, exactly where you're at. You bring your pride before God, plain and simple, you see it for the parody of holiness that it always was, and then you mentally give it to God. You let go of it as best you possibly can. You find that place where you clench a li'l fist inside yourself - I do it in my stomach - and you unclench that fist as completely as you can. You remind yourself that your heavenly father sees you at your most ridiculous and loves you and you just let it all go. Personally, I like to stay in that place for a little bit, just enjoy some time free from anxieties and day-to-day concerns, but the point is to bring your most ridiculous self to God as completely as you can.

Step 1: Pray for humility.

Step 2: Prayer of petty honesty, giving our foolish pride to God in faith that he'll do something useful with it.

Step 3: Give of yourself

I don't really mean money or resources here. When I say "give of yourself," I'm talking about how you interact with those around you. Sometimes I mentally frame conversations as people either "giving" or "taking." It's an oversimplification, and there's certainly room for both in a

healthy friendship, but I suspect that you all intuitively know what I mean when I talk about people who “take” in a conversation, and people who “give.” That’s what I’m talking about here: to do your level best to be the one who is “giving” in the conversation, no matter what the conversation is.

To put it another way, the third step is to really put your focus on those around you. Listen closely when people speak to you, focusing on both what they’re trying to tell you and on what they need from you. Look for ways in conversation to make someone else’s life a little better: a little more cheerful, a little easier, a little softer.

I started talking about humility today by focusing on personal confidence and growth and I’m ending with the kingdom of heaven. It shouldn’t surprise us that this is a recurring theme in the Old Testament, since Jesus’ entire message was built on this foundation. There is much to be said about this, but when he says things like “the greatest among you shall be your servant,” he’s building on a clear foundation in scripture.

As the worship team comes forward, please hear me, my brothers and sisters: we are the body of Christ. We are not on this Earth to create our own personal paradise for ourselves, securing our own comfort at any cost. We’re on this Earth to create God’s paradise for one another. We are here to mourn with the grieving, rejoice with the celebrating, listen to the isolated, show kindness to the forgotten. I’m not arguing against healthy personal boundaries; we should always use those. But we still need to serve the least of these. And to do that properly, we need humility.

-

My beloved brothers and sisters, may God’s peace guard your mind, may his joy strengthen your heart, may you fully reflect his love, may he teach you his wisdom and may you choose his humility as you go out this week.