

“Goodness or Humility?”

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Folks, I am 65 years old, have been a pastor for 40 year and have served here at Chisholm Baptist for over 29 of them. I have two master's degrees from Bethel and have read hundreds of theological books over the years. But... I am *still learning new things*. In fact, I believe there is still plenty of truth that God has revealed in the Bible, that I have yet to discover, and I am pretty sure the same is true for you. I think John Robinson, the pilgrims' pastor, hit the nail on the head, when he told them before they boarded the Mayflower and headed for the new world: “If God should reveal truth by another man, be ready to receive it. For I am persuaded that the Lord has yet more truth and light to break forth from His holy word.”

Robinson, like me, and I hope you, was not expecting new revelation from God. Rather, what he desired as a new, clearer, more accurate understanding of what the Lord has already revealed in the Bible. In the past six months I have learned five important truths that I am going to share with you in sermons over the next few weeks. Maybe “learned” is not the right word because these are things I already knew on one level, but I have come to see them more clearly and have realized they have much greater significance for our lives.

So, after each sermon I suspect some of you will be thinking, “Yes, Pastor Dan, I already knew that.” But I suspect many of you, like me, will gain fresh insights into biblical truths that you will find both encouraging and challenging. Let's pause and pray that will happen this morning.

The truth on which we focus today is this: Humility is a better goal than goodness. As faithful followers of Jesus it is more important that we strive to be humble, then it is to try to be good. This thought became clear to me as I read a book this summer by Brant Hanson entitled, “The Truth About Us.” I highly recommend it.

Hanson sums up the point of his book this way: “We have a serious problem. All of us think we're good people, but Jesus says we are not.” And from this he concludes that the biggest obstacle we face in being a truly God honoring person is being self-righteous. Self-righteousness and its sibling, pride, are true enemies of our souls. To really

grow in our love for God and for others we need to grow in humility. Indeed, **Proverbs 3:34 Good opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.** That is quoted in both James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5, because it is an important truth.

The clearest examples of humility being a better goal than goodness are found in the gospels. As we read the book of Luke, for example, we encounter people who seem to be good, but are far away from God. Others, however, don't seem to be good at all, but are recipients of His grace.

In Luke 18, we have the story of what is often called “The Rich Young Ruler.” The man claims he has kept all of God's ten commandments since he was a boy. He seemed to be a very good man. Yet, Jesus makes it clear that this fellow was not on the path to eternal life. On the other hand, we have “The Sinful Woman” in Luke chapter 7. She was almost certainly a prostitute. She anoints Jesus with an expensive perfume. The Pharisees are shocked Jesus would let such a woman even come near Him, but Jesus speaks words of amazing grace to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

The Pharisees, a group of religious leaders, were considered to be the “goodest” people of all. Yet they almost always had a problem with Jesus, and Jesus almost always had a problem with them.

In Luke 18:10-14 Jesus tells the story of two men who went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector, a man considered a traitor and a thief because of his work for the occupying Roman government. On the surface the Pharisee was a very good man, and the tax collector a very bad man. The Pharisee prays “Lord, I thank you I am not like other people especially like that tax collector over there. A horrible person. I faithfully fast and tithe. I am a good man.” The tax collector, unwilling to even raise his eyes to heaven, prayed, “Lord have mercy on me; a sinner.” Jesus then says, it is not the first man, but the tax collector who will be welcomed by God. **Luke 18:14b for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.** My favorite contrast between the good and the humble is Jesus' story that is often referred to as “the Prodigal Son,” though it's really the story of two

sons. The younger son is clearly not a good person. He demands his inheritance from his father, then **Luke 15:13b “squandered his property in reckless living.”** You can use your imagination as to what that reckless living involved.

Eventually, he realizes his life is a total dead end, returns home and says, **Luke 15:21b “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”** Those words seem to flow out a genuine humility. The father embraces his son and celebrates his return.

But there is more to the story. There is an older brother, who has been the “good son.” He says to his father, **Luke 15:29b these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command.** When his ‘bad’ younger brother comes home, this guy has no desire to celebrate. He is actually angry with his father for welcoming his brother with open arms. Though they may all live in the same house, this “good,” but proud man, is now estranged from both his brother and his father.

Folks, these texts are all pretty clear: Being humble is a better goal than being good. And these are just from the gospel of Luke. Another one of my favorites is in John’s gospel, Chapter 8.

We have a woman caught in adultery, apparently in the very act. She is not a good person, and some very good religious leaders, mostly Pharisees, decided she should be stoned, executed. After all that is what the Bible says is appropriate punishment for adultery, Leviticus 20. Yet, Jesus comes along and basically shames the good people and tells the bad woman, “Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more.”

Actually, that story really highlights the reason why trying to be good is pretty much a dead end. Do you remember what Jesus says to these religious leaders who are ready to enforce the law? **John 8:7b “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”** After that, no one tosses a pebble at her. Despite their grand reputations, each of them knew that there was sin in their lives. And that meant they really weren’t good.

The same is true for all of us in this room. As Brant Hanson says, “All of us think we’re good people, but Jesus says we are not.” The Lord Jesus said that most explicitly in His conversation with the rich young ruler. **Luke 18:19 Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.** That truth is affirmed by the apostle Paul in **Romans 3:10,23** where he writes, **There is no one righteous, not even one. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory.**

“Okay, Pastor Dan, I got that. I know I am not perfect, but why do you say we all think we are good people?” Well, the Bible implies that multiple times, but Brant Hanson sites plenty of evidence from studies, which all agree that people tend to view themselves as more moral than the average person.

A University of London study reported “Most people strongly believe they are just, virtuous, and moral; yet regard the average person as distinctly less so.” Brant notes a scientific American report that 93% of Americans report they are a better driver than the average person and adds, “Studies show we also think we’re smarter than average. And we’re friendlier too. Plus, we’re more ambitious than average. You might think with all of this awesomeness, we might have an ego problem, but good news: we also rate ourselves as more modest than others!”

One study of the incarcerated population found that most people in prison believe they are kinder and more generous than the average person. That study concluded: “It is very important for people to consider themselves good, valued, and esteemed, no matter what objective circumstances might be.”

Besides thinking that we are morally superior to others, most of us also are convinced we are almost always right. Very few people can list even four times when they know they were wrong. This included a false confidence in our ability to remember. There is often a gap between what we feel is a certain memory and what is reality.

When the space shuttle Challenger exploded in 1986, I remember that day, I think. One professor immediately had students write down where they were when they got the news and record the basic details of the story. Then, a decade later, as part of his research, he contacted them and asked them

to tell their stories again. The result: only 7% of the reports matched the initial ones. 50% were wrong in at least 2/3 of their assertions and 25% were wrong about every major detail. One participant said, "I know that's my handwriting, but I could not possibly have written that."

Folks, our beliefs that we are morally superior to others and that we are seldom wrong, produces self-righteousness. This is what characterized the Pharisees, the rich young ruler and the older brother, self-righteousness. And Brant says, "The impression I get from Jesus is that the battle against our own self-righteousness is our biggest battle of all." And it is a very deadly battle for those who are not believers in Jesus. Often, self-righteousness is what the evil one uses to 2 **Corinthians 4:4b** **Blind the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.** These folks will never turn to the Lord Jesus because they think they are doing just fine without Him.

That is true of my friend, Sue, for example. She is convinced she is a good person. The fact Sue knows people who go to church that have had affairs or struggled with addictions causes her to believe she is morally superior to most Christians. And Sue is convinced she is correct in her belief, really a theological belief, that good people like her will surely go to heaven. In fact, Sue has all sorts of ideas about God, about what He is like and how He does things, which are based solely on her opinions, but she is convinced she is right. And she is not interested in listening to what the Bible or anyone else has to say. Sue says, "I have my own religious beliefs that are right for me, and that is good enough."

Yes, most folks think Sue is a good person. She does volunteer work and helps a lot of people. Yet, she is full of self-righteousness and pride, and if that doesn't, by God's grace, change, she will never put her trust in Jesus Christ, will never receive His salvation, and will never experience eternal life.

Friends, I suspect you know people like Sue, because there are a lot of them out there. Folks, who because of their self-righteousness and pride, are convinced they don't need the gospel. They don't need to trust and follow Jesus. We should be praying that the Lord would enable us to help them see that is simply not the case. All of us

need, desperately need, the purpose, the forgiveness, the love, the hope, the freedom, and the joy that can only be found through Jesus Christ. And, friends, let me just add that if your self-righteousness and pride are keeping you from turning to the Lord Jesus, it is not too late. As His spirit enables, you need to stop trusting in yourself, and put your faith in Jesus Christ today. If you are not sure what that involves, please give me a call, or even talk to me before you leave today.

However, it is not just unbelievers who struggle with self-righteousness. Even as Christians, each of us is tempted to have self-righteous and proud attitudes. Yes, these are sinful attitudes, but all of us at time fall into this trap. And I fear that some of us may be pretty much stuck in this trap.

"But, Pastor Dan, someone who is a Christian cannot be self-righteous and proud. After all, **Ephesians 2:8,9** says, **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a reward for the good things we have done, so no one can boast.**"

Well, there are certainly self-righteous people who call themselves Christian, but probably are not. Yet, I know that some true believes in Jesus still struggle with self-righteousness and pride. I know because I am one of them. And I know that even though I struggle, by the grace of God, I have been able to recognize and battle that self-righteousness and pride more in recent years. Oh, I know I am not as humble as I should be, but I praise God, that by His grace, I am more humble than I used to be.

Let me share with you some things I remind myself of frequently in by battle against self-righteousness.

#1 I am a sinner. I still commit sin whenever I fail to act, speak or think as the Lord desires, or whenever I don't love God or other people as I should. This is not a surprise, because by nature I am simultaneously a saint and a sinner. Being a pastor for 40 years doesn't change that.

Oh, there are some sins I have never committed. For example, I have never been drunk in my life, ever. But even a long list of sins I have not done or maybe no longer do doesn't change the fact

that I am guilty and deserve God's wrath. **James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.** Or as the NLT puts it **James 2:10 For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broke all of God's laws.** This means, that no matter how committed I am to trusting and following Jesus, I will never deserve God's favor. I will never earn approval.

My relationship with God is totally dependent on having Jesus' perfect righteousness counted as, considered to be, my own. I fail the test of life, unless Jesus' perfect score is written beside my name. So, like the apostle Paul, Philippians 3:9 I rely not on a righteousness of my own, but on a righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. I agree with Martin Luther who said this is an "alien righteousness," something that comes from totally outside of myself. That's why I realize self-righteousness is totally foolish, even though I sometimes still cling to it.

#2 I remind myself that comparing myself to others is usually foolish. Yes, in one sense we are all sinners, equally in need of God's grace. The ground is indeed level at the foot of the cross. Yet it seems pretty obvious that some people's lives are more sinful than others. I also know there are times in my life when I am guilty of more sin than I am at other times. My goal is to grow in my love for God and for others, and if that is happening, I should be glad. However, I need to remember that some sins are not as obvious as others but are equally destructive to our souls.

Tim Keller, referring to the prodigal son story, calls them younger brother sins and older brother sins. Younger brother sins include things like sexual immorality, alcohol and drug abuse, foul talk, wild living and even things for which you might get arrested. Older brother sins are not as obvious and are often socially acceptable. They include things like selfishness, envy, bitterness, covetousness, and pride. So, if I am finding success in avoiding any of those younger brother sins, I need to be very careful that I am not falling into some older brother type of sins.

For example, if I learn that my friend Joe is arrested for drunk driving and I develop a haughty, superior attitude toward him. I suspect my sin is just as bad as his. And it is more dangerous. Joe will likely be embarrassed and may

feel very badly about what he did. He may even resolve to never drink and drive again. I, on the other hand, am likely to think my attitude is somehow appropriate and may not even recognize it as a sin.

However, the closer I or any of you get to the Lord, the more we grow in our faith, the more His light will shine in the dark corners of our lives. When that happens, we will recognize our sins more. We will see that things, especially attitudes, that we didn't think were a big deal are actually sinful and dishonoring to the Lord. The closer I get to the Lord the number of sins I commit will likely decrease, but the number of sins of which I am aware will likely be greater. And when I am aware of those sins, those actions and attitudes that dishonor the Lord, I am not tempted to compare myself to anyone else or think of myself as somehow better than others. Rather, I feel gratitude for God's amazing grace that saves a wretch like me. I find myself echoing Paul's words from **1 Timothy 1:15b Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the worst.** Oh, I realize that last phrase is not objectively true, Adolf Hitler was a worse sinner than me. Yet, I understand that my sin is so significant that I really cannot worry about anyone else's. There should be no room for self-righteousness in my life.

#3 To battle self-righteousness, I remind myself of a verse that for decades I didn't realize was in the Bible. **1 Corinthians 4:7 What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?** The reality is that any good thing I do, any good attitude I have, any good quality in my life, is not something for which I can take credit, but something that is there because of the grace of God at work in my life. That means my soul should be filled with gratitude, leaving little room for pride or self-righteousness.

Friends, the journey from pride and self-righteousness to true humility is a long often difficult one. I have a way to go, quite a way, but I know it is the road I want to be on, and I hope you do as well. May God grant us the grace to travel down that road, always remembering there is no need to be self-righteous, when we have the righteousness of Jesus.