

Humility

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, "...unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4).

Today we conclude our summer series on preparation for heaven with lessons and reflections on the tender, generous and often misunderstood quality of humility. No doubt we all know that the Lord teaches humility throughout His Word, but the question is, how can we apply these teachings in our lives today? How can we be truly humble *and practice humility* without enabling compulsive or opportunistic people to take advantage of us in ways that are unhealthy for both them and us? In other words, what IS true humility, why is it so important, and how can we cultivate that heavenly quality while we live in this very challenging world?

It's not easy. In fact, it's not even easy to talk about because when you do it's hard to avoid the perception that you think you have it, and feel superior to others – which isn't so. In one way or another we all suffer from a lack of humility; we all have episodes of pride or arrogance, selfishness, feelings of contempt for others, and so on. We all think and say insensitive, conceited things from time to time. But with the Lord's help we know we can learn from our mistakes, and we know others can, too. So let's explore this together.

One reason the Lord spoke of little children in the context of humility is that little children generally recognize how little they know and how helpless they are. When they need something they may try to get it for themselves, but more often than not they end up having to ask for it, or crying about it, or having a tantrum. In fact they aren't often really humble at all, but because of their limitations they represent this quality outwardly. And so in them we have a natural image of something spiritual that they themselves have yet to learn. But what is this exactly?

The passage from Matthew speaks of humility. But it is often cited in our doctrines as representing innocence. So the two qualities are intimately related, and they often suffer from the same sort of misrepresentation. For example, very often when we refer to someone as being "innocent" we think of him or her as being free of guilt or deceitfulness. Often, as well, we use the word to describe someone who is just plain naive – inexperienced, unaware, sometimes even clueless. But being naive or unaware is *not* a heavenly quality and it is *not* what we mean when we talk in the church about either innocence or humility.

Rather – and many of you are familiar with this definition – we understand true innocence to be a wise and informed *willingness to be led* – not by just anybody but by the Lord. And this is tied to humility because without humility we are not willing to be led; *we want to lead*.

Now as a matter of interest the Writings for the New Church employ two distinct Latin words to describe the condition of humility. One is *humilitas*, which translates easily as the state of being humble. But in fact there's more to it than you might think. The root of the word is *humus*, meaning earth, and that is a word we still use today when we talk about good soil for gardening.

To be humble, then, is to be close to the earth, or lowly, and by extension, of lowly rank or status. It is a word that can also imply a degree of *insignificance*.

The other word much more commonly used in the doctrines is the Latin, *humiliatio*, from which we get the English, humiliation. Now this is important: humility is the state of *being* lowly, or in spiritual terms recognizing that we *are* lowly and thus, in and of ourselves, not worth much. But humiliation is a more active word. It is a noun, but a noun taken from a verb, and so it represents the act of humbling – humbling either one’s self or someone else. It is, in short, *a humbling*.

Today, of course, the word, humiliation, implies embarrassment, shame or disgrace. But the original meaning, and the significance of it for us in relation to the Lord, is not that we should be ashamed but that we should actively engage in the process of humbling ourselves, that is, recognizing and acknowledging the truth that without the Lord we really don’t amount to much.

OK, it’s more than that. As the term is used in our doctrines it really means recognizing and acknowledging that of ourselves we are *nothing but dust and ashes*, nothing but atoms and molecules, and that from this perspective our spiritual lives are nothing but falsity and evil. Like it or not this is the truth. Without influx and revelation from the Lord we wouldn’t have the slightest clue about anything heavenly or anything even approaching genuine charity other than what some have called “enlightened self-interest.” But in order to receive this revelation and truly understand the spiritual life we have to acknowledge that we need it. We have to set aside our high opinion of ourselves and, like a child, accept our ignorance and ASK.

The Jews of the Old Testament were very good at this business of humbling themselves, at least outwardly. When something went terribly wrong in their lives they could demonstrate their grief and remorse by literally rolling in the dirt, tearing their garments and covering their heads with ashes from their fire pits. In the case of mourning over a death in the family it was not uncommon for them to hire professional mourners, who actually held small vials to their cheeks to collect the tears they shed in honor of the deceased – to prove how mournful they were! And when they wanted to show their generosity they would often hire trumpeters to go ahead of them to attract attention to their giving. But of course the Lord exposed the hypocrisy in much of this during His ministry, and counseled instead (in the Sermon on the Mount) that we should not make such a big show of our humility – in prayers, fasting or good deeds – but rather cultivate a true, inner humility so that our actions can flow from an innocent heart.

We read in the doctrines that *humiliatio*, the humbling of ourselves, consists in “one’s acknowledgment that in himself there is nothing living and nothing good, but that all within him is dead, even cadaverous, and in the acknowledgment that everything living and good is from the Lord” (AC 1153:2). We also read – and you may cover your ears if they are sensitive to strong language – that “mutual love, which alone is heavenly, consists in a man’s not only saying of himself, but acknowledging and believing, that he is utterly unworthy, and that he is something vile and filthy, which the Lord from His infinite mercy continually withdraws and holds back from hell, into which the man continually strives, indeed longs, to precipitate himself. His acknowledging and believing this is because it is true; not that the Lord, or any angel, desires him to acknowledge and believe it for the sake of his submission; but that he may not exalt himself, seeing that he is even such; for this would be as if excrement should call itself pure gold, or a fly of the dunghill should say that it is a bird of paradise. So far therefore as a man acknowledges

and believes himself to be such as he really is, he recedes from the love of self and its cravings, and abhors himself. So far as he does this, he receives heavenly love from the Lord, that is, mutual love, which consists in the desire to serve all. These are they who are meant by “the least,” who become the greatest in the Lord’s kingdom [see Matt. 20:26-28; Luke 9:46-48]” (AC 1594:4).

Well. All this is easy to see in someone else, especially the bit about the fly and the bird of paradise. What more pathetic sight can you imagine than an arrogant, contentious person calling everyone’s attention to himself and his problems while dozens, maybe even hundreds or thousands of other people are dismissed as irrelevant, if even a thought occurs to him about them? We’ve all seen this, and we’ve all cringed in response. But what about ourselves?

How often do we think within ourselves, “I have this figured out. I know how it should be. And I wish everyone would just pay attention and do it my way!”

But what do we really know? And what right do we have to require anything of our neighbors, apart from what is prescribed in the law? If we want them to be considerate of us, or nice to us, the only rule that applies is that we should be considerate and nice to them. *The rest is totally out of our control.* Besides, why do we deserve any better than the next guy? Consider your reaction when you’re away from home, but near enough, and you see a fire truck, siren blaring, going down your street. You think, “Oh, my! I hope it’s not MY house!” But whose house would you rather have it be? Or consider your reaction at the scene of a neighborhood crash: “Oh, I hope that’s not anyone *I* know!” But whose child or mother would you rather have it be? In fact, you might handle the whole thing better based on your knowledge of the Lord and His providence than anyone else in your neighborhood. And you might benefit more than they would by having to go through that trauma. – Not that the Lord wishes it on anyone, but what’s the point of thinking otherwise?

The truth is that “when a person is in *humiliatio* (that is, the process of humbling himself) he turns away from the evil and falsity present in him... and in so doing removes them. *Once these have been removed the Divine is able to flow in with good and truth*” (AC 4347:2). So also in a passage we often quote at Thanksgiving time we read,

“The Lord does, it is true, demand humility, worship, thanksgiving, and much else from a person, which seem like repayment, so that His gifts do not seem to be free. But the Lord does not demand those things for His own sake, for the Divine derives no glory at all from a person’s humility, worship, or thanksgiving. It is utterly inconceivable that any self-love should exist within the Divine, causing Him to require such actions for His own sake. Rather, they are required for man’s own sake, for if someone possesses humility he is able to accept good from the Lord, since in that case he has been parted from self-love and its evils which stand in the way of his accepting it. Therefore the Lord desires a state of humility in a person for that person’s sake, because the Lord can flow in with heavenly good when that state exists in him. The same applies to worship and thanksgiving” (AC 5957).

All this leads to what may be a surprising conclusion. For we are accustomed to think that any

attitude or gesture of humility signifies some sort of weakness, or, as noted before, some sort of shame or embarrassment. In fact, our doctrines point out, *the effect is just the opposite*. For when we empty ourselves of the pretentious idea that we are more worthy than others, wiser, better, more important, more deserving or more in control, indeed anything more than dust and ashes in the Lord's hands, then we can let go of all the jealousy, resentment and frustration that would drive us crazy and just be grateful for everything He gives us. Not only that, but we can really enjoy the opportunities we have to serve others – to teach, comfort and encourage them, to reassure them, to share some wisdom from our experience, or to make them smile – *without concern for ourselves* – because then the Lord's love will fill us up and His wisdom will enlighten us, and we won't have to feel bad about ourselves at all.

In fact, the acknowledgment of what we really are without Him will produce in us an overwhelming sense of gratitude that He cares and provides for us anyway, and a wonderful sense of freedom from the burden of pretending otherwise. It will allow us to let go of all the shame, fear or self-consciousness that we may feel about our past or present states, and really eagerly receive HIS goodness and truth, knowing that we don't *deserve* it but that when we give up the arrogance of our own power and self-importance He can replace it with real courage and confidence.

What is that courage? It is the willingness to persevere despite the challenges, despite the threats to one's ego or self-esteem, despite the hardships that we KNOW are only temporary, realizing that the Lord has a much happier and more durable plan for us in the long term.

And what is that confidence? Our doctrines call it "the faith of charity." It is the faith that comes from focusing on the Lord and what He would have us do for others, not whatever they want but what the Lord wants for them in so far as we can perceive it. The Lord does not call us to be victims or martyrs by submitting to any kind of disorder. He calls us to give up our selfish concerns so that we can honour HIM and receive and share HIS love, HIS wisdom and HIS power. When we do so, recognizing all the time that it IS His, and that we may not yet – at any time – fully understand or embrace it, we will turn to those who are wise and kind among us for support and encouragement, but most of all to the Word itself – again and again – to be renewed and refreshed, inspired and informed, and yes, *disciplined and corrected*, that His kingdom, not our own, may come, and His will, not our own, may be done, "as in heaven, so upon the earth."

Amen.

Lessons: Mark 5:1-20
Children's talk on the Real Miracle of Healing What's Inside

Luke 18:9-17
Arcana Caelestia #4347:2