

October 27, 2019

Sir 35:12-14,16-18; 2 Tm 4:6-8,16-18; Lk 18:9-14

It is hard to strike a good balance in life. Whenever there are two extremes of acting or thinking, we can tend to drift to one or the other. It makes me think of a certain person I know who tends to want to see everything done the right way. He hovers over people who are trying to do something critiquing every step, and is free with advice - often taking over in order to make sure that the thing is done right. When people push back he will turn and say “fine do it yourself then” and just walk away and offer no help. Going from one extreme to another not quite hitting that middle ground of being truly helpful. Jesus talks to us today about humility - something that it can be hard to find the middle ground with - but something that when we miss the mark will really cause problems in our relationships with others and with God.

When Jesus says: *Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted*, he is saying that the one who is humble will be elevated and brought to a wonderful place, and the one who exalts himself will find a disappointment in the future. When we have a lower estimation of ourself the only way to go is up, and when we exalt ourselves the only way to go is down. However, Jesus is not saying to look down on yourself rather than exult yourself, he is pointing to a middle ground where true humility lies. There are really three positions. Exalting yourself, devaluing yourself, and humbling yourself (having humility). We all must seek true humility but we can go to extremes. The one who devalues themselves will need to come up to the place of true humility, and the one who exalts themselves too much will need to come down to reach the point of humility. So lets look at both these extremes first and then center on the middle ground of true humility.

The people that Jesus is not outwardly addressing in the parable are those who devalue themselves. I know people who think so low of themselves, and they think God also sees them as worthless, and they hear God speaking to them as if they were worthless. They have overshot the humility goal. In this state they can't be exalted because they convince themselves that God would not care to exalt them. God's statements such as *I have loved you with an everlasting love¹*, or *The Lord your God is with you ... He will take great delight in you; in his love he ... will rejoice over you with singing²*, or *Though [your mother] may forget [you], I will not forget you!*

¹ Jeremiah 31:3

² Zephaniah 3:17

*See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands*³. These statements they don't hear. Devaluing yourself is not accurate because God values you. He does not want you to see yourself as different that you really are. This is not true humility it only brings despair, depression, disconnection from God - not the exalting that Jesus promises from true humility.

The other extreme is more common. Going to this extreme is more dangerous because it has, at its heart, Pride which is the root of all other sins. It is to this group that Jesus is really aiming his parable. We heard in the Gospel: *Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else.* This stance was seen in the Pharisee who openly stated: *O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, adulterous -- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.* He was doing good things - you can't fault him for that. He was following the Law and probably really wanted to do as God would want. The problem was his attitude of superiority that caused him to put himself over other people whom God values. In this state, one does not want to go down from their pedestal. The only way you should go - for someone like this - is up, and eventually they place themselves above God in their own mind. This was the sin of Adam and Eve, this is the pride that causes a whole range of human conflicts, this is that false notion that we are the deciders of what is right and wrong, and we push God to the side.

In reality we all are on par with each other. The only one who is higher than anyone is God, and the only one lower is the being that is not God. When we reach the point of true humility we enter truthfully into our relationship with God. God loves us all, and our willing humility opens the channel to that love. We heard: *The LORD is a God of justice, who knows no favorites. ... The one who serves God willingly is heard ... The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds.* Humility is knowing this. To realize that we are all loved by God, to stop looking down on others, to stop criticizing God for how God does things, to stop saying that our judgement is better than God's - this is humility. When we can realize that our judgement is right only when it aligns with God's, that our prayer is on track only when it matches God's will, and that our value depends on the value God places on us and not that which comes from others, we become humble. In this humility we can follow God and know with St. Paul that *The Lord will rescue [us] from every evil threat and will bring [us] safe to his heavenly kingdom.*

³ Isaiah 49:15-16