

Increase/Decrease: The Secret of Humility

Daniel 4:1-18; John 3:22-30

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In February of 2013, Pope Benedict became the first leader of the Catholic Church in 600 years to resign rather than die in office.

New York's Cardinal Dolan said that it was as if Benedict was saying, "I feel weak; I feel fragile; I am frail."

The Catholic Cardinal said, "Here you have a man who's aware of the gifts that God has given him, the high office to which the Lord has called him, but is also aware of his own limitations, as we all have to be."

(https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-edward-bernstein/pope-and-rabbi-different-perspectives-on-humility_b_2697401.html)

You would think that acknowledging limitations would be an easy thing. We are all limited in what we can do.

We are not Supermen or women. We are not faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and we cannot leap tall buildings in a single bound. It's easy to admit things like that.

But it's much harder to admit when we are struggling with a secret sin.

It's much harder to admit that we are struggling with our relationship with our spouse or children.

It's much harder to admit that we have financial problems or that we worry and cannot trust God.

It's harder to admit that we have more work to do than we can get done or that we are struggling with stress.

It's much harder to admit we don't feel as needed as we once were or that our bodies are not as healthy as they used to be.

It's much harder to admit that we have any weakness, or frailty, or shortcoming.

Whenever someone asks how we are doing, we always say we are "fine," and we pretend we are fine, even to those who know us best because we are too proud to acknowledge weakness. Besides, few people who really ask, "How are you doing?" really want to know.

Humility is difficult to achieve because our sinful self is pulling against us and the result is pride.

All of you know what is in the middle of pride, don't you?

Yes, you figured it out. It is "I."

I am right in the middle of "P-R-I-D-E" just like I am right in the middle of S-I-N.

Pride says, "I am enough. I can find my own way. I can choose what is best for me. I don't need your help."

Pride says, "I don't need to live by a 2000-year-old Bible telling me what to do or how to live."

Pride says, "The world revolves around me, my wants and my wishes."

Pride says, "Humility is overrated."

But is it?

I want to share two stories that might help us as we evaluate our own lives.

Let's reach back to the Book of Daniel and have a visit with King Nebuchadnezzar and then over to the New Testament and visit with John the Baptist.

In the book of Daniel, Daniel and his friends are among the first of many from Israel to be exiled into a foreign land after their country was conquered by the Babylonians.

They are stripped of their identity and names and forced to learn a new language and new customs. They had to study and prepare themselves to be of service to the King of Babylon.

There couldn't have been a greater contrast between Daniel, who knew he had to depend on God for his survival, and King Nebuchadnezzar, who did not think he had to depend on anyone for his survival.

After all, he was the king. Whatever he wanted, he got. Whatever he commanded, people carried out for him.

However, it was discovered that Daniel had a gift for being able to interpret dreams and the King, like most people, had dreams when he slept.

The king had one dream in particular that troubled him. It may have been a reoccurring dream. Daniel was summoned to explain the king's dream.

In the King's dream, Daniel saw a chopped down tree and wild animals.

God revealed the meaning of the dream to Daniel. He was not afraid to speak the truth about the dream. Daniel told the king that he was the chopped down tree and that once he was chopped down, he would have to live with the wild animals.

Daniel told the king he would have to live that way for 7 years until he learned that God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth.

Then, what Daniel prophesied came true.

At the end of those seven years, King Nebuchadnezzar was a changed man.

Living an afflicted life, apart from his kingdom, among the wild animals humbled him. It changed his life.

It caused him to see and understand that the world didn't revolve around him.

After seven years, he confessed:

“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” (v. 37)

Now contrast the attitude of King Nebuchadnezzar with that of John the Baptist.

John was the cousin of Jesus. John was chosen to proclaim that Jesus was the Messiah.

One of the most familiar things that John said about himself and Jesus is this: “He must increase, while I much decrease.”

This is so different from the attitude that King Nebuchadnezzar had before he was humbled by seven years in the wilderness.

King Nebuchadnezzar was all about building a kingdom with more territory, acquiring more servants, and claiming more resources.

He was a typical king who believed that more was the key to being a great king.

Being king is usually a life-long journey in having more and being praised for being more. You learn to expect more, and if you don't get more, you make people suffer more.

One negative about capitalism is that we get caught up in the need for more.

Capitalism is about acquiring more by our initiative, energy, intellect, drive, and hard work. It's a beautiful thing to live in a country where this is possible. But this can also lead us to think that more is the answer to all of our problems and the key to our happiness.

It's easy to lose perspective that God is the source of our joy, happiness, and our blessings.

One of the benefits of my travels and ministry in Liberia is being with a people who have nothing materially compared to us but are just as blessed spiritually because of their love for Jesus and dependence upon Him.

Before the Hebrews inherited the Promised Land of Canaan, Moses instructed them:

¹⁵He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. ¹⁶He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. ¹⁷You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." ¹⁸But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. (Deuteronomy 8)

It is a great temptation of ours to think we are self-made and that we have acquired what we have on our own.

That's the temptation that John the Baptist avoided as he announced the coming of Jesus as the Messiah.

John the Baptist had his own group of disciples. Before Jesus arrived on the scene, people were following his preaching. They were going out to the River Jordan, and people lined up by the hundreds to be baptized. They were responding to his fiery brand of preaching as he called people to repent of their sins.

However, at no time did he ever say, "My power. My strength. My preaching. My forgiveness. My leadership. My teachings."

It was all about Jesus. He came to point people to Jesus.

"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," John said when Jesus came to the Jordan.

"He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." John 1:27

"He must increase," John said, "so I must decrease."

Humility. It's not about me. John the Baptist understood that.

For our church to grow, we much have a John the Baptist attitude.

It's not my classroom. It's not my talent. It's not my worship service. It's not my time. It's not my building. It's not my pew. It's not my parking place. It's not my money. It's not my small group. It's not my Sunday school class. It's not my church. It's not about me. It's about increasing Jesus.

Pride causes churches to wander in the wilderness. In churches that get possessive, you see people, but not Jesus. Those are churches that are going to find times in the wilderness.

For you to grow in the Lord, you must decrease, Christ must increase.

You must understand, "It's not my gifts. It's not my house. It's not my future. It's not my life. It's not about me."

Pride causes people to wander in the wilderness.

So Paul wrote to the Romans, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God--this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1).

It's about decreasing me and increasing Jesus.

Think about it like this. Every one of us at the end of this life will want to increase Jesus with a graceful leap to heaven. Am I right? Is there anyone here that doesn't want to increase Jesus when you die? When you die, you want to see Jesus. You want to see what Jesus has in store for you in a place beyond this one.

You want to see Jesus, don't you? You want to be in His world.

So isn't a legitimate question for Jesus to ask, "What are you going to do to increase me now, between the time you have to live and the time you want me to grant you that heavenward leap?"

When are we going to learn what John the Baptist taught? This life isn't all about us.

It's about increasing Jesus. That takes great humility, the kind Jesus showed.

Maybe that's the reason Jesus said of John the Baptist, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist, yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Matthew 11:11

Jesus is saying, "John was a humble man, but there's always room for some more humility."

Today, I'd like to ask you to take an evaluation of your own life by answering two simple true and false questions. By doing this, we can gain some self-awareness and move toward some transformation in our lives and in our church.

1. True or False. Excluding my family, my first impulse is usually to serve other people instead of myself.
2. True or False. Excluding my family, my first impulse is to meet my needs without thinking about what others want or need.

Think about those for a moment.

Now, if Jesus were to increase and you were to decrease, what would you have to do to swing the pendulum away from yourself, and more toward Jesus.”

Today, we've all been to church. However, transformational worship will occur as we make an effort to increase Jesus and decrease self.

What does that look like in your life?

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