

HUMBLED TO BE EXALTED

Luke 14:1, 7-14

I ran across this story recently...

There I was with my wife and two-year-old daughter caught in an isolated, snow-packed campground in Oregon's Rogue River Valley with a comatose vehicle. We were on our way to celebrate the completion of the second year of residency training, but none of my medical skill was of use in fixing the recreation vehicle we had rented.

We had woken up to a cold, cloudless morning. I fumbled with the light switch, but there was just darkness. I tried the ignition. No response. My wife and I concluded that they were victims of a dead battery and that my legs were of more use than any mechanical knowledge I might have. I decided to hike to the main highway several miles away while my wife stayed behind with our daughter.

Three hours and a twisted ankle later, I arrived at the highway and flagged down a logging truck, which let me off at the first gas station and drove off. As I approached the station, a sinking realization hit me that this was a Sunday morning. The place was closed. But there was a pay phone and a tattered phone book. I called the only automotive service located in the next town, 20 miles away.

A man named Bob answered and listened as I explained our predicament. "No problem," he said as he got the location. "I'm usually closed on Sundays, but I can be there in about a half an hour." I was relieved that Bob was coming, but mindful of the economic implications of the offer to help.

Bob arrived in a glistening red wrecker and drove us to the campground. As I got out of the truck, I turned around and watched in utter amazement as Bob leveraged himself out of the truck on braces and crutches. He was a paraplegic!

Bob made his way to the camper. I began to make the mental calculations for how much this was going to cost.

"Yep, it's a dead battery. A little jump start and you'll be on your way." Bob restored the battery, and while it was recharging, he entertained our daughter with magic tricks. He even pulled a

quarter out of his ear and gave it to her. As he was putting his jumper cables back into the truck I asked him how much I owed him. "Oh nothing," he replied to my astonishment.

"I need to pay you something," I insisted.

"No," he reiterated. "Back in Vietnam someone helped me out of a worse situation than this when I lost my legs and that guy just told me to pass it on. So you don't owe anything. Just remember when you get the chance, pass it on."

Fast forward about twenty years to my medical office where I frequently train medical students. Cindy, a second-year medical student, has just helped me see a patient whose life has been ravaged by drug and alcohol abuse. Suddenly I notice tears in her eyes. After several questions, Cindy explains to me, "My mother could have been that patient. She has the same problems." As a result I arrange for Cindy's mother to get treatment. After several weeks of such treatment, her mother is a new person. "How can I ever repay you?" Cindy asks. All I have to do is return in my mind to that cold campground and think of Bob.

-Dr. Kenneth G Davis

Just pass it on. There have been ad campaigns urging people to do acts of kindness for others. They encourage us by saying that if we do something good, the world will be better for everyone. And that is just plain smart. Do good to others, and they will do good to you—everyone benefits!

Children learn that at school. If you cooperate in school, things go smoother, the teacher is happier, and life is a lot better in the classroom. Our Old Testament lesson says, "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of the prince." That is just being smart.

I know from experience coaching children in sports that when you line up for an activity, many jostle to get to the head of the line. So to catch them off guard, I tell them that the last will go first. After

a while the kids are on to me and end up going to the back of the line, anticipating that then they will be first.

The Japanese tell the story of the rock and the stonecutter. There once was stonecutter who lived alone. Though he had acquired great skill, he was very poor. He lived in a tiny bamboo hut, and his clothing was tattered.

One day as the stonecutter was working with the hammer and chisel upon a huge stone, he heard a crowd gathering along the streets. By their shouts he could tell that the king was coming to visit his humble village. Joining in the procession, the stonecutter gazed in awe at the king, dressed in marvelous silk, was greeted by his subjects. "O how I wish I had the power and glory of the king," he thought. "He has soldiers at his command. There is no one more powerful than our king."

His cry was heard in the heavens, and immediately the humble stonecutter was transformed into a powerful king. He found himself riding on a great horse, waving at crowds of people who flocked to see him. "This is power," he thought.

As the summer progressed, however, the new king watched the effects of the heat on his people. Men and animals became weary, and plants withered under the powerful rays of the sun. As he looked at the sky, the new king realized that the sun was far more powerful than any earthly ruler. "How I wish I were as powerful as that," he thought. "I wish I were the sun." Immediately his wish was granted.

How the stonecutter relished his new role as the sun. He gloried in the power he felt as he surveyed the kingdoms below him. As he sent his bright rays to the earth, he watched kings and princes hide under their parasols and powerful warriors became weak under his gaze. Even the crops in the fields were under his command.

Then one day a tiny cloud moved over the land, shielding the earth from the sun's bright rays. Seeing that here was something more powerful, he thought, "I want very much to be a cloud." Again his wish was granted.

Now he blocked the sun's rays and felt important. He gathered all his strength and became a giant cloud, pouring down rain on the earth. Rivers formed where previously there was none, and water flooded the streets and the farmland. Everything—trees, animals, people—seemed to be awed by his power. Everything except a huge rock that remained untouched. Again he discovered something more

powerful. "There is nothing," he thought, "as powerful as a rock. How I wish I were that huge stone." His wish was granted.

As a stone he remained motionless and powerful unmoved by either sun or rain or anything that nature could bring. The stonecutter felt exempt from all of the forces that shaped the life and existence of those around him.

Then one day a man approached him, carrying a bag. When he stopped, he pulled out a chisel and a hammer and began to chip away at the rock. Realizing that the man with the tools was more powerful than any rock, he cried out, "O, I want to be a stonecutter."

Once again the heavens heard his outcry, and he became a stonecutter. Once again he lived in a bamboo hut and made his living with hammer and chisel. And he was content.

We can treat kindness and humility that way. We can be kind and humble because it's smart. It's going to make life better for me. I remember in school they would have races to see who was fastest. We would run in heats, rather than everyone at once. A lot of the fastest kids would line up for the first heat, but only some of them would be able to go on to another heat. If you were smart, you'd wait until the next heats, when the slower kids raced. Then you would have a better chance of winning that heat and going on to the next round.

We can do that with God. If we are quiet and don't stand out in the crowd, then we think that God won't see us. He won't notice our sin. We act as if we can hide from God. Be humble, and God will overlook us. But if we build ourselves up and brag, then we are set up where everyone can see our weaknesses.

The ancients recognized the danger of pride and conceit. Our word "hubris" comes from the ancient Greeks and how they warned of the dangers of arrogance. Just about every Greek or Roman play is about that theme. When a Roman general won a major victory, he paraded his army in triumph through the streets of Rome with enemy prisoners in chains and the general riding on a glorious chariot. But in the chariot behind the general was a slave who would whisper in his ear, "All glory is fleeting."

So what is so special about Jesus telling us to be humble and kind? Why should we be humble? He says, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may not invite

you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” He uses the word “reward.” Granted if we give to the poor, they can’t give us anything in return. But it can sound as if the reason we give is still to get something, a “reward” from God. It’s part of being “smart.” It’s part of keeping a low profile so I don’t get into trouble. It’s part of going good so I can get on God’s “good side.” But it is not the direction that Jesus is leading us to.

Jesus says, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted.” Jesus is telling us a lot more than just to “pass it on.” We are encouraged to do that with emails. You hit a few keys on the computer, and off the message goes to your friends. No, Jesus is not talking about scratching someone’s back so they will do it for us. He is calling us to give without expecting anything in return, even from God. I don’t do it to so God thinks I’m good. I don’t do it to be in control of my future. I do it as Jesus has done for us. He gave His whole life for us. What could He get in return, He’s God? There is nothing He needs, nothing we can give Him that He doesn’t have already. Out of His love, He gave to us.

But can we do that? “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles

himself will be exalted.” Jesus humbled Himself to the point of His death on the cross. And He took us there with Him. On the cross, Jesus died to take away the “control,” the “do this so I can get ahead” attitude that keeps us from being truly humble and kind. Now we can come to God with nothing. And then we can depend on God for everything. Our “reward” is not something we earn from God for being good. It is His gift to us. What our humility and kindness does is not earn that from God, but it makes us trust totally in His grace. The king in our Old Testament calls us forward, rather than us clawing our way forward.

What that does is free us to really pass on His love. People see us giving, not because we are “smart,” not to be “good,” not to get credit for it, but just because that is how we are in Christ.

It is God’s love that we are called to share. When we do things to be “smart” and to get an advantage for ourselves, we cloud the view people have of God. People see us and our faults, not God and His love. But when we do as Jesus did, out of love, then God’s love shows through us like the pure light going through the windows. “Who humbles himself will be exalted.” We put our lives in God’s hands. He forgives us, “clears our windows,” so He can be clearly seen through us. We who are humble become the ones through whom others see our exalted Lord.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman

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