

Faces Firmly Fixed on Jesus: Loving the Limelight

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 20:45-47

Years ago, I sat under the teaching of a professor who regularly opened class with a surprising prayer. Many specifics of classroom lectures I have forgotten—sorry, teachers—but this prayer was jarring enough to stick. The prayer included a request that God would “strike us down in our pride.” The violence of that picture caught me off-guard. Surely the other students and I didn’t need God to take such drastic action to dismantle pride in our lives, did we? Well, some years later I am older and maybe a little wiser. It is not lost on me that this morning I am a living, breathing object lesson. Here I am, walking around in a flowing robe and seated in a place of honor. Here I am, delighting when I run into one of you at the grocery store. Here I am, graced by some of you with literal meal invitations; receiving welcome into your lives from others—not because I am some kind of extraordinary human being, but simply because I get to be one of your pastors.

So I experienced an appropriate level of holy fear as I studied this week. Clearly Jesus’ warning applies to me, and to the other pastors and leaders entrusted with responsibility at LaGrave. Just what is Jesus so eager to discourage in his followers? Listen to some of Jesus’ other sayings of Jesus in the book of Luke. Luke 11:44: “Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” Luke 14:8, 11: “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.... For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Then today’s passage, another variation on the theme: “Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces...they devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers.” So time after time, we hear Jesus warn the disciples against propping up their own importance or papering over internal rot with a shiny veneer. “Watch out! Don’t craft your life around loving the limelight,” he warns.

The Christian tradition can diagnose the soul sickness afflicting the teachers of the law: vainglory. Christian philosophy professor Dr. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung traces vainglory through the writings the 4th century Desert Fathers and the writing of Thomas Aquinas. “I have often called this the “A.A.A.” vice,” DeYoung writes. “An acronym for Attention, Affirmation, and Applause....”¹ “The tradition summed up disordered pursuits of glory by calling them ‘vain,’ meaning empty.” she writes. “If good things are worthy of glory, then “empty” things lack goodness, or...don’t deserve the amount of glory they get. Glory is a problem in two main ways.... First, glory can be sought for “vain” or empty things. And second, glory can be sought “in vain,” that is, for a trivial or selfish (or even morally bad) purpose.”² DeYoung points out vainglorious examples in pop culture, from Carly Simon’s song “You’re So Vain” to the arrogant but cowardly character Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*. We might also think of celebrities who launch cosmetic lines and offer advice about “living your best life”—where “best life” really means portraying yourself in the best possible way.

¹ DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk. *Vainglory: The Forgotten Vice* (p. 25). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

² *Vainglory*, 26.

In case we think vainglory is only a danger for the rich and famous, I'll let you in on the kinds of questions I asked myself this week: What is it in me that makes me think I should probably bleach my teeth? (And now, what is it in me that will feel self-conscious as I greet you all at the door and wonder if you think I should bleach my teeth too?) And why do I feel the need to maintain at least some sense that my shoes are up to par and match the rest of my outfit? Am I in danger of loving "limelight vices"--"the flowing robes" and the "greetings in the marketplace"--of attention, affirmation, and applause that goes with them? Admittedly, answering that sort of question for any of us is a tangled business. But when we begin to ascribe undue worth or value where there is only the appearance of value; or if what we value is inconsequential, too flimsy to bear the weight of the glory we assigning to it, we're in trouble.

Watch out, Jesus says. Beware, friends, when coaches are more concerned with photo ops and sound bytes than advancing the skill and character of their players. Beware, friends, when institutional leaders prioritize public relations or outward appearance and neglect the health of the organization or the individuals in it. Beware, friends, when pastors obsess over shiny belt buckles and flawless hair and fail to study, live, and love for the sake of God and others. In the last days before his death, Jesus seems to make the most of every opportunity to warn the disciples against this tendency to glory in appearances and entertain delusions of grandeur. Why? Well, it seems nearly impossible for the disciples to take this warning to heart. And even more importantly, in himself, Jesus is offering an example of servant leadership that he will literally die to demonstrate. His humble leadership is a striking foil to the vainglory of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Listen to Luke's account of the interaction after the Last Supper in the upper room, just hours before Jesus' arrest: ²⁴ *A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. (A less holy teacher would have done a facepalm at this point. But not Jesus).* ²⁵ *Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. 26 But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.... I am among you as one who serves."*

How would you define humility? Sometimes we equate self-deprecation or low self-esteem with humility. But that's not quite right. Jesus doesn't just blend into the wallpaper; he uses his goodness and his power to lead and to correct, to pour out gifts on the people around him. DeYoung offers this definition in her book: Humility is "an unusually low concern for status coordinated with an intense concern for some. . . good" and a "relative lack of concern to appear excellent to others."³ Another good definition of humility from pastor and author Tim Keller is on the sign outside Grand Rapids Christian Middle School: "Humility isn't thinking less of yourself—it's thinking of yourself less." Keller contends that when we're filled with God's Spirit and focused on God's glory, we can reach out to each other with very little self-consciousness, very little second-guessing about what we will say or how we will look or how to go about doing it. That sounds good, some of you may be thinking. But how does it *work*? Does "thinking of yourself less," cultivating "an unusually low concern for status" combined with "intense concern for some good" stand up when you find yourself in the pressure of the limelight?

About 20 years ago, a famous television personality received a lifetime achievement award at the Emmys. On a night devoted to glitz and glamor and applause, Fred Rogers used his acceptance speech to point a live audience and all those watching on television toward humility.

³ *Vainglory*, 84. Quoting Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 241, 255.

Fred said, “So many people have helped me to come to this night.... All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take...ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are, those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you? Ten seconds. I’ll watch the time.” A *Relevant* magazine columnist retells what happened next: “At first people chuckle a little—is he serious? But as he looks down at his watch, you can see that he clearly is.... And then, as the camera pans the room, you see.... People biting their lips. Mascara running. It took this gentle, kindly host of a children’s program a mere 10 seconds to strip a television award show of its pomp and circumstanceHe was, in every way, the real deal.... There wasn’t a hint of marketing sheen or focus groups in the show.... It was not in any way an act. “One of the greatest gifts you can give anybody is the gift of your honest self,” he once said.”⁴

At the end of the day, this gift of our honest selves is really all we have to give, brothers and sisters. When Peter Wehner, a writer who has served in the previous three Republican presidential administrations, asked an unbelieving social psychologist what contribution Christians could make to the public good, his acquaintance responded with one word: humility.⁵ What are some ways we can nurture that? We remember we are not self-made people. We recognize and thank God for the gifts he’s showered upon us that allow us to do what we do. We cultivate curiosity. We listen carefully and engage with interest for what we can learn from others. We invite trusted people around us to keep us grounded. These people know us well and recognize that underneath our “flowing robes” we’re all limited, fallen people relying on each other and on Jesus to make our way in this world. We appreciate encouragement and let others know it. And when we *are* honored, we acknowledge to others and to ourselves that praise really belongs to God.

Ultimately, Jesus’ teaching and modeling of humility took root and bore fruit. DeYoung again: “The early Christians’ strong reactions against the pride, honor, and glory-seeking of Greek and Roman moral paradigms reflected their commitment to making Christ and his humiliation their model of virtue.”⁶ Remember DeYoung’s definition of humility? “An unusually low concern for status” and “intense concern for some good.” With that in mind, listen to Philippians 2 as we close in worship to our humble king: “*Christ Jesus: 6 ...being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*” *The one who is “God from God, Light from Light, begotten, not made...for us and for our salvation...came down from heaven.”*⁷ *The one who laid the earth’s foundation “while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy”*⁸ *relinquished the honor that was his due from all eternity. He divested himself of inexpressible glory for a human appearance that was nothing special. Yet Jesus’ passage from glory to humility through humiliation is the very thing that leads to his exaltation: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the*

⁴ Huckabee, Tyler. “11 Mr. Rogers Quotes Every Christian Should Read.” *Relevant* online, March 20, 2015. <https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/10-mr-rogers-quotes-you-need-read/>

⁵ Wehner, Peter. “The Quiet Power of Humility.” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/15/opinion/sunday/the-quiet-power-of-humility.html>.

⁶ DeYoung, 17.

⁷ From the Nicene Creed.

⁸ Job 38:7.

name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

What Jesus has done for me—what Jesus has done for you—needs no propping up, no pretense, and no self-promotion. No glorying in vain; no love of the limelight here. Christ’s love poured out on the cross is substantial, weighty, and more than equal to bear all the glory that all heaven and earth can ascribe to it. Reverent attention, real affirmation, resounding applause. Amen.

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