

Introduction

As most of you know, my wife and I have two sons whose names are Moses and Aaron. Someone once asked me not so subtly, "**Why in the world would you name your son Moses?**" So, I told him. It's because the real Moses (which is what we call him) was probably the greatest person who ever lived.

But why was he? What made him so great? The passage I read tells us. It's because He possessed the first virtue and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn in your Bible's please to Numbers 12:1-8.

The First Vice

Verses 1 and 2 mention Miriam and Aaron. If my wife and I had had a daughter, we would have named her Miriam, Miriam Ruth. Miriam was Moses' sister and Aaron was his brother.

Anyway, verses 1 and 2 record what Miriam and Aaron did. They spoke out publicly against Moses to the Israelites. Their stated complaint was that he had married a Cushite woman. Cushites were Africans noted for the blackness of their skin.

Notice I said that was their "stated" complaint. Verse 2 reveals the "true" complaint that motivated them. It took the form of two questions. Has God spoken only through Moses? And has He not spoken through us as well? Those questions show what the problem was. They were jealous of him. They didn't like being under him and wanted the same leadership position that God had given him. Miriam and Aaron were proud.

Paul defines well what pride is in Romans 12:3. It's thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. When that's the case, we see every one and every thing primarily in terms of our selves. That's what happened here. Why did Miriam and Aaron want the same leadership position that Moses had? It wasn't principally to serve God and Israel. It was instead to be important and esteemed just like Moses

was. It was principally about them in other words.

All of us can relate to that can't we? That's because pride is what I call the first vice. The word "first" suggests two things. One is that it's the foundational vice, the one from which all the others naturally flow. Another is that it's universal. It in the core of us all and unless it's dealt with, resides there until the day we die. The word "vice" also suggests two things. One is that pride steals. It seeks a position, first, that belongs only to God. Another is that it lies. It denies our true condition and pretends that we're worthy of something we're not, the first position.

Some time ago, I got behind an elderly man and his wife in their car on a two-lane highway. He was going 45 mph in a 55 mph zone and I felt myself getting irritated that he was. He was slowing me up and I didn't like it. Do you see what the problem was? That elderly driver was doing what was in his best interest to do. But I wanted him to do what was in my best interest to do – drive faster. What made me think though that my best interest should take precedence over his? I'll tell you. It was pride. The Holy Spirit revealed that to me. The fact that I'm irritated shows that I think too highly of myself and not highly enough of him. I think I'm more important than he is.

That experience of mine illustrates that pride really is the first vice.

The First Virtue

So, don't be proud. Be humble instead.

Paul defines what humility is in Philippians 2:3. It's regarding others as more important than ourselves. We honestly truly think that. When that's the case, we see every one and every thing in terms of others not us.

That's what Moses did. Look at 11:29. This verse stands in stark contrast to 12:2. In 12:2, Miriam and Aaron wanted the position that Moses had because it was exclusive. In 11:29, Moses, who had the exclusive position, wanted it to be inclusive. He wanted everyone else to have it as well. Miriam and Aaron saw hearing from God in terms of

themselves. Moses saw it in terms of others.

That explains the editorial comment in verse 3, **“Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.”** How many people who have an exclusive position want every one else to have it as well. The answer is “almost none.” It’s clear. Moses excelled at humility – and so should we.

That’s because it’s what I call the first virtue. It’s “first” in that it’s the foundational virtue. All the other virtues – love, peace, joy, patience, and so on, rest on it. Without humility, we cannot have any of those. The Holy Spirit cannot produce them in us.

Take humility and patience, for instance. I was in a checkout line at Marc’s one busy night when the cashier had to call for the manager. Whatever the problem she had was, it was taking a while to fix it and everyone in line was making faces and grumbling about it – except the woman behind me. She commented to me that she felt so sorry for the cashier, for the stress she must have been feeling at the time. Notice the difference. The woman behind me, who was a Christian, was humble. She regarded the cashier as more important than herself. She, therefore, saw the situation primarily in terms of the cashier and was patient. But the others in line were proud. They regarded themselves as more important than the cashier. They, therefore, saw the situation primarily in terms of themselves and were impatient.

There’s no doubt about it. Humility is the first virtue. So, be humble. That’s the call of 12:1-8. Be as humble as Moses was.

Now, humility is a matter of grace. Like love, peace, joy, and all the rest, it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It’s impossible to have it unless He Himself gives it to us. But it’s also a matter of practice. William Law says it well in his classic book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Humility **“can be obtained only by daily and constant practice.”** He’s right and I can’t emphasize it enough. Humility can be obtained only if you and I daily and constantly practice it. The Holy Spirit does want to give it to us and will - but only if we practice it that way. Practicing it

that way puts us in a position that we're able to receive it from Him.

So let's practice humility by doing four things, each of which I want to explain to you.

Be Realistic

First, be realistic. I start there for a reason. It's because pride is based in non-reality and humility in reality. The reality I'm talking about is what we actually are. We need to be realistic about that, what we are. Humility will have the base it needs in our lives if we are.

Being realistic requires two things of us. First, we must practice the discipline of examen. In conjunction with the Holy Spirit, we thoughtfully, objectively, and thoroughly examine and discover what we are. We reflect on, give deeper thought to, the stirrings, the motions, the inclinations in us and the acts to which they lead. Being realistic requires a second thing. We must practice solitude. We withdraw from the sights, sounds, and activities of everyday life and get alone with God. In that setting, He can and will show us what our true condition is.

Let's stop for a moment and consider what that is. Oswald Chambers explains it in his celebrated book *My Utmost for His Highest*. He writes: **"If the Spirit of God has given you a vision of what you are apart from the grace of God, you know there is no criminal who is half so bad in actuality as you know yourself to be in possibility."** That's a startling statement. What you and I are capable of becoming is twice as bad as what criminals actually are. We don't like hearing that but it's true. Romans 3:9-18 in fact confirms it.

Let me ask you a question that illustrates it. Would you be at ease if your true condition, what you really are, were made fully known to the world? Would you be at ease, for instance, if your worst qualities and habits were fully exposed on the *Oprah Show*? The answer is "absolutely not." You – and I - would be humiliated if they were. That helps us realize something. There's no basis in fact for being proud.

So that's the first thing we do to practice humility. Be realistic.

Refrain from Pretending, Presuming, and Pushing

There are three more things we do, each of which Dallas Willard identifies in his book *Hearing God*. He calls those three things “**a fail-safe recipe for humility**” and writes, “**Try it for one month. Money-back guarantee if it doesn’t work.**” That’s probably an exaggeration. But doing those three things is essential to practicing humility.

The second thing we do to practice humility, the first in Willard’s “fail-safe recipe,” is to “refrain from pretending we are what we know we are not.” Almost all of us do that far more than we realize. We say and do things, usually subtly, to adjust how we appear to people, to make them think that we aren’t as bad as we are or that we’re better than we are. Why do we do that? It’s pride of course. So, making and carrying out the decision not to do that is a good way to practice humility.

Several months ago, a person asked me how many hours a week I watch television. I answered “two hours or less.” That’s technically true but misleading. I do watch television programming itself two hours or less a week. But I spend an additional 1½ hours here and there watching bits and pieces of movies I enjoy like *The Field of Dreams* or *Patton*. Before I began practicing humility, I would have limited my answer to the two hours and made the person think better of me than I know I am. But now that I’m practicing humility, I didn’t. I made sure to tell him about the other 1½ hours and even an additional two hours if I decide to watch a movie.

You get the point. Refrain from pretending we are what we know we are not.

The third thing we do to practice humility is to “refrain from presuming a favorable position for ourselves in any respect.” Most people do that and do it all the time, presume a favorable position for themselves. They assume that their preferences, opinions, and rights take precedence over someone else’s. That is in fact the way pride most frequently and practically expresses itself.

Refraining from doing that, therefore, is perhaps our most powerful

practice in humility. In our interactions with others, we purposely give their opinions, preferences, and rights priority over our own.

My motto in that regard is Philippians 2:4, **“Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”** The next time you’re in a hurry and get behind a slow driver, for instance, recite that verse and think, **“This driver is pursuing what’s in his or her best interest and I’m going to look out for it.”** Then be patient and kind. You’re practicing humility if you do.

There’s a fourth thing we do to practice humility, “refrain from pushing the will of others.” Pushing means overriding. Refrain from overriding the will of others. All of us are tempted to do that. We want people to be or do something. But they don’t want to be or do it. So, we say or do things to override their will and get them to be or do it.

Pushing may be the most selfish thing we can do. We want our way and are willing to take away people’s freedom, the leadership of their lives, to get it. We have to think far more highly of ourselves than we ought to in order to do such a thing. We have to be proud.

So, we refrain from doing it. We do inform and request but, with exceptions here and there, do not push. We value and respect the freedom to make decisions, the leadership over their lives, that God has given people. Consequently, we let them think and act for themselves.

Conclusion

I close with the words of William Law: **“Now in order to begin in the practice of humility you must take it for granted that you are proud. You should believe also that pride is your greatest weakness.”** Those are strong words but we need to hear them. The fact is that almost all of us here this morning are proud. So, let’s practice humility. Be realistic and refrain from pretending, presuming, and pushing. The Holy Spirit will transform us if we do. He’ll make us what He made Moses in 12:3, “very humble.” We’ll then be worthy of parents naming their child after. Why? It’s because humility is the first virtue.