

“Make Straight the Way”

Exodus 20:1-17; Luke 9:57-62

May 30, 2021

I had the great honor to attend Duke University for Divinity School but you’ve got to know doing so broke a lot of hearts in my family. You see, my entire family is filled with Tarheels. As a consequence, I was a huge Carolina fan growing up. And, of course, the pride and joy of any Tarheel is the men’s basketball team and I was obsessed.

I cried in 1981 when the team lost to the Indiana Hoosiers in the NCAA tournament final. Ah, but then, in 1982, the drought ended with a sweet jump shot by none other than a freshman Michael Jordan. Interestingly enough, my parents had recently acquired a VCR just a few weeks prior to the game. That game was taped. Oh, how we loved going back and watching that win. In fact, as the years went by, every time the Tarheels lost in the tourney, we’d go back and play that tape. And, just as it had in 1982, watching that old victory made us feel better. That is to say that it worked...for a time.

But as the Tarheel losses in the NCAA tournament piled up, that tape’s ability to make us feel better diminished. With the progression of years, not only did the tape itself start breaking down, so did the joy we received. Eventually, it became little more than a sad ritual; one that neither uplifted nor provided hope.

As with anything else, we tend to return to what works as a matter of course. But what if what initially worked stops doing so? The sad fact of the matter is that, in some regard, we do not. Habits form and the next thing you know, we find it terribly hard to change what we’re doing.

If anything, being authentically Christian means changing or more rightly stated, being changed by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit.

But the genesis of that change I believe required letting go of the past and finding, in and through Jesus Christ, a new pattern for living. I read to you now from **1 Peter 5, verses 5b-11** – *“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time He may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*

When we moved to Charlotte in 1976, my sister immediately joined the girl scout pack at Sharon Presbyterian Church. They met in the gymnasium building. My Mom was one of their leaders so every meeting, I’d have to go and wait in the lobby.

Well, it was dull. One day, I took to exploring. I found myself in a closet with a set of switches. I started playing with them. Nothing happened so I thought they were busted. That is, until I heard shouts from the gym. As it would turn out, I’d turned off all the overhead lights in the gymnasium. Worse still, those lights didn’t just turn back on. Somehow it took them time to warm up. Long story short, the girl scout meeting was unceremoniously cancelled.

As they tried to figure out what happened, my Mom asked me in front of everyone, “Jason, did you do this?”

My young mind whirled into action. If I told the truth, I KNEW I’d be grounded for, like, ever. So, I lied. “Nope, wasn’t me.” Suspicion passed from me rather quickly. I was so relieved.

Now look, I’m not here to tell you that was the first time I lied but I assure you it wasn’t the last. And every time I’ve ever been dishonest, I’ve done so because I thought it would work the exact same way. That I’d walk away from my misdeed scot-free. Of course, it didn’t but, strangely, that never stopped my from trying

A lot of that is, biochemical, interestingly. When we encounter something that we perceive as really good, our minds release a chemical to help us remember. After all, we don’t want to forget something good or something that worked and our brain helps us. When we encounter something really good, our mind releases a chemical called dopamine. Dopamine makes us feel good as a reminder. In the end, what can very easily happen is that something like an addiction occurs. Our bad behavior that worked that one time becomes a neural pattern, one

that is darned nearly impossible to change by ourselves.

All that to say, we can over time become “Addicted,” for lack of a better word, to our sins.

For those of us with anger issues, what your mind learned at some point is that when faced with difficulty, anger “worked” because it released that dopamine. One time and you were hooked. For those of us struggling with the sin of gluttony, what we’ve found is that when we eat, our anxieties are relieved temporarily. Sloth can be the means by which we’ve grown comfortable in our comfort, even at the expense of others.

What is safe to say is that everyone of us, in some fashion, plays an old tape. Feeling bad, we return to an old behavior, even if it’s bad.

Well, maybe we become aware that our old tape, it isn’t working so great. Perhaps our pants start getting too tight on our waists or an outburst of anger leads to losing a friendship. Wised up to our inner dynamics, we sent out a great program of change.

One of the times a lot of people do just a thing is at New Year’s, isn’t it? We make these things called resolutions. We declare either to ourselves or to others that “this year is going to be different.” We determine that we’re going to tackle some problem in our life and make it better. We resolve to stop drinking or go on a diet or finally get the house totally cleaned up. But, come February, how are most resolutions going?

Statistically, not so great. Studies show that 80% of resolutions are toast by February. In fact, only 8% of people who make resolutions are able to see them into reality. And I can’t help but think that the rate of failure is so high for a truly easy-to-diagnose reason. **PRIDE.**

You see, the origin of our resolutions failures is found in that we’ve chosen to fight our battles by ourselves. Which, if you think about it, is an excellent example of treating the problem with the very thing that caused it.

And make no mistake about it, pride is a sin as ancient as any others and the Bible shows repeatedly as poison.

The fall recorded for us in Genesis 3 shows uncontrovertibly how, right from the get-go of sin, pride ruled the field. The serpent tempts Eve with the hope of becoming like God. **Genesis 3:5-7** – *“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So, when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.”*

If only we humans had learned. Pride is dangerous and abhorrent to God. But, you see, maybe we humans, in our brokenness are addicted to pride as much as anything else. Genesis 11 tells us that story of the people of Babel. They decide to build a tower to the heavens so that they can overthrow God. Pride is essentially us doing something quite similar. Looking at our sin, we say to God, “I don’t need your help. I got this.”

And again, we turn to the pages of Scripture to see just how harmful to us pride can be.

Proverbs 11:2 – *“When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.”*

Proverbs 16:18 – *“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”*

Romans 12:3 – *“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”*

Y’all, I’m not kidding about this. I could probably fill the remainder of our worship time this morning just reading the verses and passages in the Scriptures concerning the terrible nature of human pride. In fact, can’t we affix pride to the greatest sin of all? The death of God’s Son was birthed entirely by a humanity that thought that it could somehow silence God.

It shouldn’t be overlooked that the source of a great deal of our anxiety stems from our pride.

I can remember a clear example from my life. Now I’ve told y’all before but the only sport I played remotely competently was baseball. And, as I got older, I remember a game from middle school. It was a close game against our big rivals and we were trailing in the bottom of the ninth. There were two outs and I was on deck to bat. I can recall standing there in the on-deck circle. My mind was racing. What would happen if I got to bat? Well, I thought, the whole game would be on my shoulders. I’d be the hero or the goat. Should I get a hit and win the game, I’ll be the talk of the school. If I strike out, I’ll still be the talk of the school but in a much less enjoyable manner.

The batter ahead of me struck out. I never got to the plate but the feeling of relief I had as our team lost was palpable within me. I know now that my anxiety came from putting myself at the center of the event which is the exact nature of pride.

Christian Pastor Colin Smith puts it this way – “The proud person feels that he or she has to make things happen. But the truth is, none of us can add an inch to our height or an hour to our life by worrying about it. What happens finally is in the hands of God. There is a powerful insight here for the person who struggles with frequent bouts of anxiety. If we want to deal with our anxiety, the place to begin is by dealing with our pride, because humility is the ultimate release from anxiety. It is important for us to be able to distinguish between the voices of Pride and Humility. Pride says, “What happens is up to me,” and this only creates more anxiety. Humility says, “Lord, everything that concerns me is in your hands,” and this is the beginning of peace.”

The poultice for our pride, the salve for our self-centeredness is humility. Which we see exemplified for us in the one place we’re to look both for instruction and assistance – Jesus Christ.

To say Jesus was humble is an understatement of cosmic proportion, isn’t it?

To begin with, we’ve got to remember that Jesus CHOSE to become human in the first place? Can you imagine that? The freedom he would’ve had? Unanchored to anything except Father and Spirit, Jesus could do anything, yet he chose to take flesh, take on limitations that were not inherently his to take on. Thus, the Incarnation itself is an act of cosmic humility.

But that’s all God stuff. What about his entrance here on Earth? I mean, he could’ve chosen to be the Son of an Earthly King, right? Nope. He didn’t. Could’ve made sure his arrival was heralded by a spectacular angelic parade visible for all to see with cherubim and seraphim exploding trumpets of Joy to the World. Nope, not so much. Aside to a very select few, Jesus’s arrival went unannounced.

How Jesus arrived on earth shows us much of his humility. I mean, this is God, ya’ll and where does he arrive? In a barn, laying in a feeding pen. Doesn’t get much humbler than that does it?

But then, Jesus lived his earthly live in a manner congruent with His entry. I read to you now from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 3, verses 13-15: “*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.*”

Jesus, who the Bible teaches us, lived without sin, comes and takes a baptism for the repentance of something he never once intersects with. That, my friends, is humility.

Then, hear this. In the Gospel of John, just before the Passover which would see him killed, Jesus Christ. “*He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him.*”

Again, what we see is that God Incarnate Choses NOT to relish His status but instead treat others, even the ones who deserve worse, better than He Himself would be treated by the World. The Lord of Heaven and Earth washes His followers’ feet.

The most remarkable Christians I meet are all quite humble. Have you ever noticed that? The ones pulling lots of weight, the ones really helping people in the world, they don’t want to talk about them, they want to talk about others. That’s humility. Paul puts it this way in Philippians – “*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*”

Authentic Christianity is rooted in Jesus and, consequently, authentic Christians are humble people.

And it’s in their humility that they both know their sin as well as knowing who it is that really removes it.

When it comes to your sins, are you ready to start winning? Are you ready to stop playing those old tapes with the hope of finding a new way of living?

Then there is a beginning.

Cast all your cares on God.

Give to God all your worries, all your fears, all your shortcomings.

For the God of love and grace will meet you with forgiveness, clothe you with righteousness and send you out into the world, empowered and equipped to make other disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Scripture and Quotes

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John 13:3-5 – “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity – “According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind...”

Our character defects end up being quite like our addictive use of alcohol and drugs. What once worked now hangs upon us like an albatross, bringing not relief but ongoing pain.