

LORD, IT'S HARD TO BE HUMBLE

(from the series: **Building Great Relationships**)

Text: Matthew 23:1-12

5/30/10

I

Today's word is "tude" spelled t-u-d-e. It's slang for "attitude" but it always conveys a certain kind. A person with "tude" can be arrogant, prideful, boastful, or even a bit hostile. "Tude" is that don't mess me quality that comes from the way we talk, dress, or carry ourselves.

We Americans love our "tude" whether it's from the "pants on the ground" youth "hip hop" music culture, or the irritated, dismissive, sarcastic –call it snarky- kind we hear from talk radio hosts.

We'll forgive almost any display of "tude" from a professional athlete - especially if they win. And we tune in to "reality" TV shows to watch people sharpen their "tude" on each other. It's a national past time.

Of course "tude" is nothing new. It's just another word for pride. And it's nothing new among Christians either. When Paul wrote the Corinthian church telling them "love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud" it is because they were envious, boastful, and prideful. Different leaders among them envied each other when it came winning the favor of the church. They were windbags as they trumpeted their spiritual gifts. And they were arrogant, "literally puffed up", with their positions and authority in the church. They were the "First Church of the "Tude"!

Pride can be fun. But in our lives, it comes with the cost. Two people in the same room, in the same office, in the same fellowship, with a bad case of "tude" are a crowd. They don't leave a lot of space for each other, or anybody else for that matter. The pride of an overestimated, overinflated self leaves little for growing relationships with other people.

And there's another problem with pride that Christians at least ought to be aware of. It runs right into a spiritual buzz saw we call Jesus, who never missed an opportunity to whack pride down to a more realistic size.

II

Jesus answer to a supersized life was to bring out the paring knife of humility. He's talking to God's spiritual dream team (or so they think) the Pharisees. And he's talking to his disciples who gazing upon these mighty rule keepers in their dress uniforms are wondering if this is how the spiritual game is to be played. So he tells them, *"The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."*

The Pharisees had forgotten that the first lesson of the spiritual life was not climbing up but falling down. It is not supersized righteousness in order to win the favor of God. It is supersized dependence on the mercy of God through Jesus Christ, which in time creates a righteous life.

Humility begins with dependence on God, and that spells the death of pride. It is to realize that nothing can make me acceptable to God except God. God cannot be merited or manipulated into approving of me. But he can be known and loved on God's terms.

It's important say that the humility of which Jesus speaks is not groveling. Humility is not the death of our self-esteem or willingly becoming a doormat for the dirty feet of abusive people. It is coming to a proper estimate of yourself. You are wonderfully gifted and you are terribly flawed. This is true about you and ever other human being you will ever meet. *And in all you are at the present moment you are deeply loved by God.*

C.S. Lewis put it as clearly and succinctly as anyone I have ever read:

Christian humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.

Humility doesn't come from working harder to be humble. (There's nothing much worse than a person who is proud of how humble they are.) It is a "blessed self-forgetfulness" (Tim Keller) that allows us to enter into a relationship with God, because we have discovered that God has already accepted us. It makes room in our lives for God and others, because there is less of us to get in the way.

The foundation to great relationships with other people is a great relationship with God. And humility is the key which opens the door.

III

God's main method of growing and maturing people is not to leave us at home with a self-help book and a televised church service. It is to entrust ourselves – our futures - to the compost pile of human relationships. But that will never happen unless we take the risk of becoming humble.

A funny thing happens when we become humble, develop a proper estimate of ourselves, before God. We come to proper understanding of other people. They like us are neither flawed nor flawless, but a complicated mixture. We develop some compassion for the all too human people with whom we share our lives, because we know ourselves.

And sure enough – thought it makes us shake in our shoes - we find some imperfect people to whom we can entrust ourselves because we discover imperfect people are all there is. Humble relationships are not the reward for those who have cleaned themselves up. They are the spiritual way God cleans up men and women for faithful living.

When we are growing in humility, we discover a wonderful freedom. We don't have to endlessly judge other people. Other people are deficient, are sinful, are broken in many ways. That should come as no surprise because we are too. Instead we can shift our energies into helping each other become more fully what God intends.

Please understand, I'm not saying that church is where we simply practice the secular philosophy "I'm okay, and you're okay" and it's rude to suggest otherwise. Jesus lived, died, and rose again because nothing could be further from the truth. I'm simply calling us to the humble standard of Jesus – work on the plank in your own eye before you invest so much energy in removing the speck in your brother or sister's eye. Good relationships can handle truth-telling, because good relationships are grounded in humility and not in judgment.

When we're free from judging people we discover that we can learn something from them. Advanced degrees, ordination, and social standing do not automatically confer spiritual wisdom on their holders. More often than not God speaks the truth through humble men and women rubbing shoulders in their daily pursuit of the way of Jesus Christ.

Jesus could have recruited twelve religious scholars to found his church. There was no shortage. He pretty much passed them by for more common folk. Could that be because people who are full of themselves have a hard time learning what they most need to know?

IV

Ask God for the self-forgetfulness of humility. Swallow hard and entrust your life and your future to some brothers and sisters who like you know something about sin and something about grace. And then see if you aren't enjoying your life a little more than you were.

Jesus said to his long ago disciples:

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:29)

How does that work? How many of us have found in the pursuit of religion something less than rest for our souls? Perhaps if I'm humble – secure in my relationship with God – I can spend a little less time coveting what you have. I don't have to have your position, education, money, or address to be okay with God. I don't have to start every morning with a spiritual inferiority complex. You're not my rival for God's affection. And though I may need to do it many times, I can afford to kick my self-centered pride to the curb.

And that means I'm free to be grateful for you and what God is doing in your life.

I can learn from your success. I can be inspired by your discipleship. We can do something good for the kingdom of God. Because God accepts me as I am, I can find some delight in who you are.

Humility is the sign of a community that has made a transforming discovery. We are God's people not because of our merit but because of his mercy. While we all have much to learn, none of us has anything to prove.

V

Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It greets other people from the position of humility. But can that work anywhere but here between 11:15 and 12:15 on a Sunday morning?

During the summer of 1778 a British warship dropped anchor in the harbor of Nantucket Island off the New England coast. William Rotch who led the Quaker community on the island knew they were there to plunder the town.

With the consent of the citizens Rotch formed a one-man welcoming committee and greeted Conway-Etherege the British commander, at the pier. He invited him home for dinner.

After dinner the commander got down to business. "We're here to plunder," he said. "As you can see your little hamlet is completely at our mercy. Where shall we start?"

"I don't know of a better place to start than my house," said Rotch. "I'm better able to bear the loss than anyone else. We have some silver plate, some good blankets, and food supplies in the cellar."

Conway-Etherege didn't know what to make of this. He hadn't heard this before. "Tell me," he said, "are there more people like you on Nantucket?"

"Oh yes, many better men," said Rotch. "We'll I want to meet them," Conway-Etherege answered.

So Rotch took him to meet a shopkeeper who had given 400 barrels of flower to the poor the winter before, and another one who had given away blankets and shoes.

"Would you like to meet more of our people?" asked Rotch.

"Oh no," replied the commander. "I can hardly believe there are three such men as you in the whole world. A whole street full of them would be too much."

So Conway-Etheridge went back to his ship and Nantucket was saved.

Perhaps if we practiced the grace of humility more consistently, more than Nantucket could be saved.