

"A GOOD WORD FOR HUMILITY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
January 12, 1997

"He has told you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you...but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

Let's face it. I think we would be in trouble if we put this verse up for a vote. After all, who wants to "walk humbly?" Or, take the verse from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek...for they shall inherit the earth". We've all had trouble with that one. Never, we say...never will that happen. Try being meek in today's world and you'll end up paying a price. Or, what about this word from Paul found in the First Letter to the Corinthians,

"...but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise...and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong. God has chosen the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are... that no one should boast before God".

So, friends...according to the Good Book, according to our Bible, there is something to be said for being humble...something noble, even saintly about being meek, gentle, kind, long-suffering, patient, lowly...as opposed to being proud, haughty and arrogant. And even though such attributes are out of style for the most part in our current culture, the Scriptures nevertheless praise these qualities, but before we get into the virtues of humility and meekness and say a good word for them...perhaps we need to inject a bit of a qualifier.

BEING HUMBLE DOESN'T MEAN BEING A DOORMAT

I think that being humble doesn't mean being a doormat!

There are a lot of people who are taken for humble just because they have back trouble....that is they have no spine. But they're not humble, they're just cowards and that's not the kind of meekness Jesus was praising. If Jesus had been meek in the sense of being timid, or a bit of a push-over, a Casper Milouetoast....He would never have ended up on a cross. Of that you can be sure. He was a person of conviction who did not let others intimidate Him.

I suppose there is a sense in which Rap Star Ice-T is right. Many young people and many adults as well do need more pride...that is, they need a healthy pride that allows them to stand up for themselves and for their convictions and motivates them to give their best. We need to work hard to raise a child's sense of self-esteem for people without the right kind of pride will never be able to make a positive and effective impact on society. A powerful witness for Christian conviction will always draw people to the side of Christ...a whiny, apologetic and timid testimony won't make disciples.

But lets take a closer look at the kind of humility that Micah had in mind, and the kond that Paul was lifting up and most especially the sort of humility that Jesus was urging His followers to cultivate and develop. Three thoughts.

A HUMILITY THAT IS WITHOUT THE REWARD OF RECOGNITION

First of all, we need a humility that allows us to do what needs to be done without the reward of recognition.

## "A GOOD WORD FOR HUMILITY"

### INTRODUCTION

Bob Hope was accepting a plaque at an honorary dinner. He listened as his many contributions to humanity were praised. Finally, when it was his time to respond, he said that he had stopped letting such honors go to his head.

"I just got a call from a fellow who said I had been named MAN OF THE YEAR by his organization," Hope said...."because I was America's outstanding citizen...its greatest humanitarian and so forth.....it was going to be the biggest dinner, the biggest reception ever. I told him I was sorry...but I was going to be tied up that night. There was a short pause...then the caller said, 'By any chance would you have Red Skelton's number?'"

Last June I read about an Episcopal priest who was asked by a High School class up in Cambridge, Massachusetts to come and deliver the graduation sermon. During the speech he spoke of this invitation as one of the truly high moments of his entire ministry. He was honored, but little did he know that those students made the selection by picking a Sunday in May and going around and attending a number of churches at worship. Their purpose was to time the sermons and the minister who gave the shortest sermon was chosen to deliver the graduation sermon. Some honor.

### DEVELOPMENT

There was a television documentary some time back that caught my attention. It was titled, The Seven Deadly Sins. Because those seven sins....perhaps you remember them....pride, covetousness, lust, anger, envy, gluttony and sloth...are standard fare on TV, I wondered what the documentary would have to say and so I made a point of switching from the Knicks to the seven deadly sins.

It turned out to be vintage TV. Celebrity quotes, some movie clips, some man-on-the-street interviews, the usual one liners, quips and here and there some clever witticisms. But in a sense it was an enlightening program in that it revealed clearly the profound moral confusion of our culture.

Rap singer Queen Latifah was asked about the sin of pride. "Pride is a sin?" was the way she responded...."I wasn't aware of that". And then it was actress Kirstie Alley who added, "I don't think pride is a sin....I think that some idiot made that one up". And Rapper Ice-T echoed the same idea saying,

"Pride is mandatory. That's one of the problems of the inner city...kids don't have enough pride".

Interesting. One of the basic teachings of Scripture seems to be totally out of touch with the values of our modern culture. Go back to the Old Testament, to that great verse in Micah which many of us memorized in our youth and down to this day consider to be the greatest saying in the Old Testament,

There was an interesting article in Life magazine sometime back about a man by the name of Dan Dyer, a maintenance man for Roper Hospital down in Charlestone, South Carolina. Seems that Dan Dyer for quite a few years had been responsible for the hospital heating and air conditioning...and yet no one on the hospital staff knew of Dan's existence for Dan was usually out of sight down in the boiler room or some such place and his contribution to the healing of the sick just wasn't all that obvious....not until Hurricane Hugo came roaring into Charleston in September of 1989.

Electricity went out all over the city. Roper Hospital was reduced to a system of back-up generators and for some reason the diesel pump for the generators was not pumping the needed fuel to them. And that threatened to leave a large hospital and its Intensive Care Unit - the unit where patients are on life-support systems - with no electricity. It was in the midst of that crisis that Dan Dyer made five trips out into a hurricane to hand-pump diesel fuel back to the small tank that fueled the generator. Every trip through those high winds, water and crashing debris put his life at risk, but it was done to safeguard the lives of patients in the hospital.

After that night, nurses, the hospital workers and the chief administrator and even the mayor and the governor of the state knew who Dan Dyer was. He became a bit of a celebrity and was recognized from that point on as the man who keeps Roper Hospital running. Somewhat ironic, isn't it? For a decade or more, Dan Dyer faithfully performed functions vital to a large hospital, but until a crisis occurred, the other hospital personnel didn't have the slightest clue as to who he was. Some of you may know how it feels....the unsung, quiet people of the world, and the city.

We have many people in this church who work behind the scenes just like Dan Dyer. These backstage people keep our church running. They work with our children and our youth....they count our money and arrange for the flowers on the altar, or prepare the communion table. You may see them working in the kitchen at a coffee hour or putting envelopes in the pews and straightening the Bibles and hymnals every Sunday after most of you leave. What if they refused to serve because they don't receive any recognition or what if they refused to serve because they don't see their names "up there in lights?" But they do serve, not for any recognition but because of a commitment made long ago and always kept. Yes, commitments made are commitments met. They are humble people in the finest and best sense of the world. That's one kind of humility that all of us need. It reminds me of something someone said to me when I was first starting out in the ministry...

"It's really amazing how much 'kingdom-building' you can do if you don't always have to step and give credit for something done...." And yes, there's truth in that.... but on the other hand, it's always good to say 'thanks'.

GRATEFUL FOR THE THINGS WE HAVE

But there's another kind of humility that we need to cultivate...it's the kind of humility that allows us to be truly grateful for the things we have...for, oh... how often we take things for granted and people, too.

Here's an illustration that will help to open up this thought....

Danny Bush in his book, Invitation to the Feast, tells about a cousin and an aunt of his who had a childhood dream come true. It seems that both of these women were born and brought up in a rural area near Spartanburg, South Carolina. As children growing up, they remember what a treat it was at Thanksgiving and also at Christmas to receive an apple, an orange or some stick candy. Times were hard but there was always this abundance of fruit as well as lots of family love and an appreciation for simple gifts.

Apparently on their South Carolina farm they had apple, peach and fig trees, but no orange trees. They grew up without ever seeing an orange tree even though they would enjoy oranges twice a year.

After many years on the farm and working in cotton mills, this cousin and aunt retired. They had looked forward to going places they had never been to before and seeing new sights. One of the things they wanted to do was to go to Florida and see an orange tree. The day came when they made this trip. They stopped the car, got out and the owner of the orange grove gave them permission to look at the oranges and yes...even to pick a few.

Now, these retired ladies acted like little children in that Florida orange grove. At long last they saw in person the trees from which came the oranges they had delighted in as children growing up in South Carolina. In that grove, they even thanked God for oranges. And they also thanked God for their health that even in old age had enabled them to travel some distance to see oranges growing on a tree.

I wonder....could you and I ever find delight in such a simple pleasure? As a people we are perhaps richer than we have ever been before...but are we happier...more content? One wonders, yes....people today are more apt to be frustrated that they don't have more for which to be grateful. Oh, for the joy and the peace and the contentment of a bit of humility. I think that truly humble people recognize that all of life is a gift from the great "Giver" and therefore are able and geared to delight in even simple pleasures.

#### A HUMILITY THAT ALLOWS US TO PUT OUR TRUST IN GOD

But there is one more type of humility that we would do well to develop and that is the kind of humility that allows us to put our trust in God. And here is where pride truly turns out to be a deadly enemy. It causes us to put our trust in ourselves rather than God.

I read a story about a missionary who years ago went out to teach in a school in China. She began this venture with a deep feeling of trust in God and a deep sense of God's calling, but it was a long voyage across the Pacific and she began to have all kinds of fears and doubts and just like Peter, the disciple, who had begun in confidence but then took his eyes off Christ and let the winds drive him to terror, she, too, was beset by anxiety. "How will I ever provide for myself? Will I be able to learn the language? What will the response of the people be to me....a young lady from the West, going into a different land?"

One night she went to sleep deeply troubled by all her fears, all of her uncertainties...and she tells of a vivid dream she had that night. It was as if she were standing in the middle of the ocean all by herself with nothing but a two-by-four supporting her at the surface of the water. In that condition, a voice said to her,

"Start walking to China". She answered back, "But I can't....I'm not able to walk on water. If I leave this secure standing place, I will surely drown." But the voice inside her insisted, "I said...start walking toward China".

And with fear and trembling, but in obedience, she lifted her foot and put it forward, and just at the very moment that it was touching the surface of the water, another two-by-four, like the one on which she had been standing, mysteriously appeared out of the depths. And every step she took was met by support emerging from the deep. She woke with a new sense of confidence and of trust in God.

There are those times in our lives when we will be in deep water...fearful of sinking, fearful of going under...drowning. At such times where will we put our trust? In our intellect and our intelligence? Will it be in our health? Our robust health? Will we put it in our investments...in our stocks and our bonds, or perhaps in the equity in our home? There may come that time when all of these will fail us. If we put our trust in ourselves...in our accomplishments, our possessions and our portfolios....there may come that time, regardless of how much we have accumulated when we will stare into the darkness and feel the waters of defeat rising around us.

But if we put our faith in God, in that greater power, if we confess and cling to the conviction that our strength and our ability are not completely adequate but that God's strength and God's ability will never fail us or let us sink, then we will discover why the humble and the meek of this world are so richly blessed.

Let me remind you that Christian humility is now cowardice...and certainly not a summons to us to be something of a doormat. Rather, it is an invitation to continue to work behind the scenes in an enterprise greater than any of us could ever accomplish on our own. Second, it is an invitation to appreciate the simple blessings in life. Finally, it is an invitation to trust God whose strength will never fail. For as it says on that little card that I keep over my desk in my second floor study,

"I said to the man who stood at the gate of the Year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than safer than any known way.'"

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, once again, O God in these quiet moments. And wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives where pride and arrogance sometimes will surface. Help us to grow in our appreciation of the gentle virtues...to find delight in simple pleasures and to be grateful for Your gifts to us. And help us to find a faith that allows us to put our trust always in You, You who have come to us in the life and love of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.