

Attitude Adjustment, Week 1 – Intro

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, and to mark the occasion, we're beginning a brand new message series that we're calling Attitude Adjustment. And we're looking at a particular attitude adjustment that everybody can use and that every single one of us needs to make, everyone. In fact, the less you think you need to make this adjustment, the more you probably do. And as soon as you think that you've mastered it, and rest comfortably in the knowledge that you have it, you've lost it. This attitude is actually a virtue. A virtue is a habit of high moral standard. And this virtue is, in a certain sense, the most important virtue, the most fundamental virtue of all. And over the next five weeks, we're going to look at its application when it comes to living out the Christian life more successfully. What we're talking about could be called the most important, the most fundamental virtue because it stands before, it lies beneath every other virtue. What we're talking about is humility.

Humility. And while humility is vitally, critically important, it is often misunderstood. See, many people think of humility as weakness, low self-esteem, lack of ambition, a conscious effort to minimize or downplay our accomplishments, a low opinion of yourself, or maybe even a bad opinion of yourself. None of that is humility. Neither is that a virtue. It is also not a mark of spiritual maturity. It's a mark of insecurity that we have to work our way out of. Humility is not a low opinion of yourself. It's a clear opinion of yourself. St. Bernard said, "Humility is knowledge of yourself as you really are." It's derived from a Latin word, *humilitas*, which gives us our English word, ground or grounded. To be humble is to be grounded, to be rooted.

In his book, "Good to Great," Jim Collins studied companies that successfully moved from good performers to become great performers in the marketplace. In his study, he studied some of the greatest performers in the marketplace in recent years. And his study discovered what he came to call level five leaders. Level five leaders. Every company he studied that moved from good to great did so under the leadership and direction of level five leaders. Collins' premise is that level five leaders represent a rare combination of sincere humility and strength of will. He said that these leaders are absolutely ambitious, but they channel their ambitions into the company or project that they're leading and serving, and not into themselves. Well, people who live the virtue of humility are like that. They're not weak. They don't lack ambition. Instead, they channel their strength, their ambition, their creative energy, their intellect, and all of their resources into something beyond themselves, something greater than themselves.

Well, to begin to unpack this important topic, we're going to take a look at the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Bible. So the first book, Genesis, tells the earliest history of Israel, ending with the Israelites in Egypt. The second book, Exodus, tells of their eventual enslavement in Egypt and their subsequent escape. The third and fourth book, Leviticus and Numbers, tells us all about their journey through the desert. Deuteronomy tells the end of that first part of the Bible and presents the final teaching of Moses to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land and before he dies. The Israelites had been in the desert for 40 years. God's intention had been to bring them directly to the Promised Land, which was a matter of only several days' journey from Egypt. But in their impatience and ingratitude, in their arrogance, they sinned before God. And so, as a penance, they were forced to wander around, literally in circles, for decades. They wandered around until everybody in that sinful, prideful, arrogant

generation had passed away. And at this point in the story, God is calling the next generation of Israelites, and Moses is preparing them, teaching them about the past, and shaping a vision for their future.

Moses says that when they get to the land they are, first of all, to make an offering of their first fruits, the first fruits with their first produce, their first product, their first margin of profit from a harvest. This was about giving back to God first, giving to God first as a reminder that everything comes from Him. Then Moses teaches, "Then you shall declare before the Lord your God, 'My father was a wandering Aramean who came down to Egypt with a small household.'" So this describes the Israelites' ancestor, Jacob, who lived in exile, more or less, as a nomad. Moses is telling the Israelites that, in their worship, they are to remember their humble origins. He continues, "But there, in Egypt, He became a great nation, strong and numerous. When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and He heard our cry." So this tribe of exiles, of nomads, eventually ends up slaves in Egypt. A humble beginning humbled even further. But, in their oppression, they turn humbly to God and, in their humility, God heard their cry.

Moses continues, "He brought us out of Egypt with His strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders, He brought to a land of milk and honey." It wasn't by their own power that the Israelites escaped from Egypt and slavery but because of God's strong hand and outstretched arm. It was God who parted the Red Sea. It was God who provided food in the desert. And now, it is God who is going to give them blessing and abundance in the Promised Land. So Moses concludes, how should they proceed? "They should bow down low in His presence," even as they

experience the triumph of their entrance into the Promised Land and the complete defeat of all of their enemies, they are to do so with abject, utter humility. They are to bow down, physically bow down, as further physical proof of their humility.

The Israelites call themselves the chosen people, and on the surface, that could sound like a prideful statement, but actually, it was meant to be the opposite. Other nations boasted of their strength and their accomplishments, the Greeks, of their wisdom and erudition, the Romans, of their military power and administrative ability. The Israelites didn't have any of that, yet they call themselves the chosen people as a reminder that their only boast was that God had chosen them. They were nobody without God. They were nomads and slaves without God. All they had to offer was what God had given them.

Well, as we begin this series, it might help to be honest. Honestly, humility is difficult. It's difficult for most, all of us, it's difficult for me. It's challenging to be humble even when we want to be. Our pride, our ego get in the way. We don't like to look bad or lose control. We do not want to admit when we're wrong. We do not like to say we're sorry. It's hard to be humble even when we want to be. And a lot of the time, we don't want to be. If we've been disrespected, if I've been disrespected, I don't want humility, I want an apology. If I've been offended, I don't want humility, I want payback. If I've been hurt, I don't want humility, I want revenge. These are all reasons why we need to work on humility by adjusting our attitude.

We need to learn to see humility, not as something that lessens or diminishes or weakens us, but something that strengthens us, something that builds us up to be the person

we want to be, the person that God calls us to be. And we see this, we see humility in at least three basic ways. First of all, humility grounds us in the basic reality that there is a God and it's not me. There is a God and it's not me. Just like the Israelites, you have to recognize that God is God and everything we have comes from Him. Our tendency is to look at what we have, especially if we've worked hard, especially if we've been successful, and think we have it because of us. In fact, our achievements at work or school, our finances, even our family, they're all gifts from God. Don't get me wrong, your efforts matter a lot. They're incredibly important. But they must be recognized and understood in the context of what God has given you, of what God has done for you, of what God is doing for you right now.

Second, humility grounds us in the basic reality that we are made for relationships. We need one another. And humility is a basic ingredient. It's incredibly helpful for success in any kind of relationship. If you can be humble, then you can be kind, because you're able to put the needs of others before yourself. If you can be humble, you can be merciful, you can more easily receive and extend forgiveness because you can recognize your own faults and failures first. If you could be humble, you can be compassionate, because you have the ability, you take the time to understand someone else's situation. Because it is so useful, because it is so helpful, because it is so attractive, humility is incredibly powerful in all of our relationships.

Third, humility grounds us in the basic reality that God insists on it before he's willing to act in our lives. You can be successful with God without being highly intelligent, clever in business, outstanding in finances. You can be successful with God and not be graceful in appearance or skillful in athletics. You don't need any of that to be successful with God, but you

cannot be successful with God without humility. Case in point, the Israelites in the desert. In fact, the Bible tells us, God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. God humbles those who exalt themselves but lifts up those who humble themselves. That's just the way things work. Eventually, that's just how things work. Humility is the soil, it's the ground on which God can work in our lives, growing, blessing, and favoring.

So, for all of those reasons, over the next few weeks, we're going to take time to look at the attitude of humility. Next week, we're going to look at the importance of prayer in growing humility. The following week, we're going to look at some of the obstacles, including the biggest obstacle of all to humility. In week four, we're going to look at how humility helps us turn certain areas of our life around when they're headed in the wrong direction. And then we will wrap up this series, just before Easter, by looking at how God lifts up and blesses and favors the humble. So, this week's challenge, the only challenge that we're offering to you is to commit to this series for the next five weeks, which is easy to do, because you can catch the series at any of our weekend services here on Ridgely Road. You can join us online for any of our Sunday messages, and the message is always available all week long on our website.

One of my all-time heroes is Pope John Paul, Saint John Paul. He was a man of incredible courage and great accomplishments. He stood up to the communists in Poland. He helped to bring down the Iron Curtain in Europe. He hastened the demise of the whole Soviet Union. He provided hope and courage to people who lived in fear everywhere. And he inspired people around the world to greater faith. He's often called Great, Pope John Paul the Great, and I think he earns that title. I had the chance to meet him on many

occasions because I studied in Rome for a number of years, but my most personal up-close and extended encounter with him was actually right here in Baltimore when he visited in 1995. I was involved in planning that event, as well as helping to host the visit the day that he was with us. During the course of that day that he was here, there was a built-in break time after lunch for the pope to rest and relax. And we'd set aside a suite of rooms for him and his entourage, which included his personal bodyguard, his valet, his doctor, and his personal assistant, a fellow named Father Dziwiesz (*pronounced "Father Jivish"*).

Well, we weren't given any specific instructions for the arrangement of the suite. So we did the best that we could, making it welcoming and comfortable and attractive. Of course, we provided hospitality in the suite as well, hospitality in the form of a cold buffet, which we prepared ahead of time and had to leave in place unattended. Because when the papal party was in the suite, nobody else was allowed in there. So the pope and his entourage go into the suite and close the door, and I just waited out in the hallway with the secret service. We just stayed out there waiting. I didn't know what else to do so I just stood there. And about 15 minutes into the break, the door of the suite cracks open, and Father Dziwiesz pops his head out and he says, "Michael, Michael, come here." My heart sank because my first thought is that we did something wrong, we've forgotten something, we missed something, we had violated some protocol, and now, I was in trouble.

So I'm like, "Yes, Father. Yes, Father. What's wrong? What's the matter?" And he says to me, "The food in there." And I thought, the food, I knew it. It's the food. It's the buffet. It's not good enough. It's not big enough. It's not Italian enough. It's not Polish enough. "Yes, Father, what about the food? What's

wrong?" And he says to me, here's what he said, "Michael, the pope wants to know, can we have some?" And I saw in the moment, beyond his rock star status and obvious virtues and world-class talents, at heart, the guy's greatness was his humility. You know, humility isn't thinking less of yourself. It's just thinking of yourself less.