

Humility Factor Week #4 – March 30,31 Mistakes, Faults, & Failures

Welcome to the fourth Sunday in Lent. We are glad you are here. Our series during Lent has been entitled The Humility Factor. It's a great message to invite an un-churched friend to church or to catch up on past messages yourself.

Today, we're going to discuss how to be humble in the face of our faults and failures. And to do it, we're looking at a surprising story found in the Luke's Gospel that was just read. And here's what's going on at that point. Tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain saying, **"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."** So, people who would never go to church, never had anything to do with religion or God, are attracted to Jesus.

People who were nothing like Him - **liked Him**. And that bothered the church people, bothered the church people that un-churched people were coming to church and getting to know God. They thought that they remained holy by separating themselves from such people. Jesus came to dispel such notions, of course, and the church people just didn't get it. And so they grumbled and complained against Jesus. They did it all the time throughout the Gospels. But here's what happened this time.

In response to their complaint, Jesus tells a story. Now if you grow up in church, you've probably heard this one before. It's usually called The Parable of the Prodigal Son. And it might be familiar to you, maybe so familiar that you'll overlook its premise. Its premise is outrageous. It's entirely outrageous. In the story, the son is telling his father, essentially, **"I don't want to be around you anymore. Let's just proceed as if you were already dead. And by the way, go ahead and give me my share of your estate."** It's shocking, shocking on its own.

But even more shocking is what the father does in response. The father divided the property between the two of them. So he accepts his son's proposal and splits the property between an older son and this younger one. We heard what happened, he gets his belongings, sets off to a distant land, Las Vegas to party like a rock star, he squanders his inheritance and as we hear everything ends badly for him. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. He runs out of cash just as the recession hits. His foolishness is matched by misfortune, making a bad situation worse.

How often does that happen? It seems like life delivers that up all the time. You make a poor decision and then another decision beyond your control that aggravates the situation and you find yourself deep in debt. It's your own fault. But then you get slammed by an unexpected expense that was not your fault. You wait until the very last minute to study for the exam. And then at the very last minute, you get another assignment handed to you too. It's just the way life seems to work sometimes.

Anyway, in what was apparently his only option, his unfortunate young man does something truly unthinkable in that culture. He hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. Now while on the farm he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him anything. No occupation could have been more disgraceful for a Jewish man of a respectable family. Pious Jews had nothing to do with swine because they were considered unclean. But the son is so desperate he's willing to do it anyway. And even in this situation, he's still so impoverished that he yearns to eat the food of the pigs, which was essentially compost and trash. He's gone as low as he can go.

And it's just at that point that the story begins to turn. And it turns on a single phrase. We're told...it's not going. We're told, "Coming to his senses." In other words he is taking responsibility for your actions. Suddenly, it dawns on him that not only does he have a problem, but he's the author of his problem.

When we have a problem, it can take quite a lot for us to even acknowledge it, we know that. But even after we do, it can be more difficult for us to take responsibility for it. Everything in us, everything in us wants to blame somebody else. Find an excuse. Take the easy way out. "My marriage is in trouble because my wife doesn't understand what I need." "My grades aren't any good because my teachers are out to get me." "My career is going nowhere because my boss is an idiot." That's certainly one way to approach your problems, for sure. Lots of people do. **But another route is offered to us through humility.**

We can be humble and take responsibility for why we are where we are. "My marriage is in trouble because I haven't made it a priority." "My grades aren't what they should be because I don't study." "My career is going nowhere because I haven't developed my skills and put in the extra effort. **"The prodigal son chooses to humbly accept responsibility for his actions, and it turns his situation around.** It's a fairly simple formula, and it works exactly the same for us now as it did for him then. It's a biblical principle. And Jesus is teaching us that it works.

Think about it. **Weakness plus humility equals strength. Disappointment plus humility equals success. Failure plus humility equals victory.** And that list could go on and on and on. Ultimately, it's the attitude of humility that allows us to take any situation in life and turn it around for our own advantage. The prodigal son comes to his senses and decides to go back to the Father and admit his folly. Notice in the story that he doesn't make any excuse for his behavior. He doesn't say, **"Father, you should have known that that was a bad idea and talk me out of it. What were you thinking?"** He doesn't say, "Father, if you didn't love my brother more than me, none of this would have happened." He doesn't say any of that. Instead, he says, **"Father, I sinned."** He begins the long journey home, rehearsing every step of the way what he's going to say.

And here's what happened. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said, ***"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son."***

But that's when the father cuts him off. The guy didn't even get to finish his well-rehearsed speech **because the father** is so joy-filled at his return. This is interesting, another attribute of the surprising power of humility. **Not only does it work, it works quickly. Sometimes, instantly, the fastest way to bring peace to conflict is to simply say, "It's my fault. I'm wrong. I made a mistake."**

Now, of course, the story goes on, and there's another brother involved. And that would take too long for us to get into this morning. We've looked at the humility of the prodigal son. But in doing so and in conclusion, we'd have to admit that he did act out of desperation. **It's true.** He only acknowledges his sin when he had no other choice.

So he's not exactly a shining example for us. **Eventually,** he acts sensibly but not very impressively. And yet the interesting reprise to the story is that while the father knows all that, he just doesn't care. The father's willing to take the son's contrition on any terms the son wants to extend it. And in that sense, **it is actually the action of the father, not the son,** that reveals the meaning of the story and the real heart of humility.

Humility is really all about selfless love. The father in this story is obviously representing God the Father. And the story is teaching us about the incredibly humble heart of God himself. We don't often think about it that way. But the heart of God is humble. We know that. We've been taught that because it's given expression on the cross.

So let me ask you. How are you doing with all of this? Do you have...are you cultivating a habit of admitting your faults and failures or do you have a knee-jerk reaction of deflecting responsibility? Do you own your mistakes? Are you trying to do that, or are you just looking for others to blame? Do you willingly honestly regularly say you're sorry because when we do, it has this incredible ability to change and transform us more into the person that we want to be, the person that's more attractive to the people around us and the person that God wants us to be.

There's a kind of amazing irony at the heart of this whole series. As we aspire to be more humble, we actually become more like God.