

+ Zephaniah 2:3, 3:11-13 + It's Hard to Be Humble + 4th Sunday after the Epiphany + 29 January 2017 +

Back around 1980, a singer named Mac Davis came out with a country song entitled "It's Hard to Be Humble." It was the song of an extremely self-centered country singer who is at the top of his game. Now some of you might remember that song or may have even heard it, but here's the refrain: ***"Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way. I can't wait to look in the mirror 'cause I get better looking each day. To know me is to love me. I must be quite a man. Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble. But I'm doing the best that I can."*** Pretty silly, right? It's still funny nearly 40 years after its release. You chuckle because the singer is so arrogant, so self-centered, so narcissistic that he can't see why anyone would not love him. We chuckle because no one could be that self-centered, that arrogant, or lack humility like that...could they?

That's when the song starts to make us uncomfortable. While you and I are quick to think, "At least, that's not me," do your words or your actions or your thoughts ever sound like another chorus of that refrain? While I may not be so overtly in love with myself, how often don't I catch myself in love with my way of thinking or my background or my social status or my life as superior to someone else's? While you may genuinely believe that you are not perfect in every way, how often do you look down your nose at someone else or look for a way to criticize so you can cut them down to your size?

"Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble," isn't it? Take a deep-down-inside look at yourself and what do you discover? You discover the reason why it actually is hard for people like you and me to be humble. Take that deep-down-inside look and what do you find? You find a sinful heart that throbs with love for you, yourself, and you. You find a sinful mind that always tries to put your needs, your wants, your desires ahead of anyone else. You find a sinful soul that is only inclined towards you and you alone, that looks for answers in the depths of yourself, that is so curved inward that you won't look outside yourself to anyone or anything else—unless it serves you and your will. The very concept of loving God above all things and submitting your heart, mind, and soul to his will is repulsive, because it means you'd have to give up control. You'd also have to acknowledge that before the holy God, you have nothing on your own to offer. Loving your neighbor as yourself—that is, loving anyone whom God places in your path—seems so simple, yet is so contrary to your natural wiring and mine. It is hard to be humble!

The ancient people of Israel had a similar problem. Read through the early chapters of the prophet Zephaniah and their problems look all too familiar. Arrogance, pride, and a lack of true humility marked their lives in words and thoughts and actions. In fact, they rejoiced in their pride. They were quick to cut down people with critical and deceitful tongues and swift to shed blood, even to rebel against God himself chasing after idols of their own making. They always knew better than anybody, even God.

Into this arrogant mess, the Lord sent his prophet Zephaniah. We don't know much about him. He knew Jerusalem well and was probably related to David's line of kings, yet Zephaniah's message from the Lord is clear. "Repent and turn from your sins! Humble yourselves before the Lord! Stop thinking that the Lord will do nothing, because judgment is coming!" That message sounds like John the Baptizer preparing the way for Jesus. God wanted his people to hear that message because judgment was coming.

Judgment had already come for the cousins of Zephaniah's hearers. The ten northern tribes of Israel had been swept away in their arrogance against God by the invading armies of Assyria. Cities were leveled. Countless people lost their lives. Thousands were scattered all across the Assyrian Empire and peoples of other lands were settled in their place. The Assyrians even marched right up to the gates of Jerusalem, but the Lord delivered his people from destruction. Yet their time of grace was slipping away. It was only a matter of years before the Babylonians would be there besieging the city, destroying the temple, and hauling many off to exile.

Zephaniah wasn't just sounding a warning of coming Babylonian judgment. When you look at his prophecy, it's like looking at a mountain range. You see the coming Babylonian judgment like the foothills, but behind those fearful foothills, you see dark peaks of God's judgment coming upon peoples and nations and kingdoms throughout history until you see the most imposing peak of all—the Last Day. Zephaniah looked ahead and warned the people to repent because that Day was coming when the holy God will judge all the arrogant, all the proud, all who have rebelled against him or who think they can depend on themselves. On that Day, the Lord will judge the earth.

With such a fearful picture before them, Zephaniah urges God's people, ***"Seek the LORD, all you humble of the earth, who carry out what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be concealed on the day of the LORD's anger..."*** "The day of God's judgment is coming, so seek him! Seek what

¹ http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Mac_Davis:It's_Hard_To_Be_Humble.

only he can give you! Stop looking to yourselves and instead look to him! You have been rebellious and shameful, proud and deceitful. There has been no peace in your lives, yet you are still proud of yourselves! Stop seeking your ways and instead seek his! Perhaps you will be concealed. Perhaps you will be sheltered from his anger.”

Doesn't sound all that encouraging, does it? Zephaniah recognized how hard it is for you and me to be truly humble, especially before the Lord. Look back on your own life and what do you see? Rebellion? Shame? Pride? Deceit? No peace? A constant seeking of your own ways? That's what makes Zephaniah's warning timeless. You and I see all those things in our lives.

...But that's where the God of free and faithful grace steps into our arrogant mess. God knows how hard it is to be humble, how internally impossible it is for you and me to truly be humble before him. Surely it was a common temptation that Jesus faced as the people clamored to him for healing, for help, for peace. Many did want to make him a king, but that's not why Jesus came. Jesus came to be the humble servant that you and I and those ancient Israelites could never be, totally and completely submitting to his heavenly Father's holy will and perfectly loving his neighbor. Jesus became that humble servant, that humble Savior because God knew how hard it is for us to be humble. He knew that he had to do everything for us sinners.

So that's exactly what the Lord of free and faithful grace promised through his prophet Zephaniah. **“On that day you will not be put to shame because of everything you have done in rebelling against me.”** God was going to do everything for sinful, arrogant, self-centered rebels like you and me.

“For then I will remove from among you your jubilant, arrogant people, and you will never again be haughty on my holy mountain. I will leave a meek and humble people among you, and they will take refuge in the name of the LORD.” For anyone who remains in their arrogance, in their pride, in their love for self, they will face God's condemning judgment, but when the Lord of grace acts on our behalf, there is no room for pride. There is no room for arrogance, no room for self-centered love. Looking deep down inside and looking back on our past, you and I can make no claims before the holy God, except this. Our God is a Savior God who has given me everything though I don't deserve one ounce of it. Our God is a Savior God who has done for me what I could not possibly do. Our God is a Savior God and before him, I am nothing more than a beggar with empty hands, and yet he has given grace upon grace unforced, unasked, unearned.

By faith in that Savior God, I see God differently and so do you. You see what he has done, so that before God, there is nothing humiliating about being **“meek and humble.”** There is nothing humiliating about being a beggar in his midst because Jesus became a **“meek and humble”** beggar for you. The Apostle Paul says it beautifully in 2 Corinthians 8(:9), **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”**

If anyone had a right to boast, to be haughty, to be proud, it was Jesus, but he did not. He humbled himself and confined himself to a human body. He humbled himself and lived in poverty. He humbled himself and suffered even death on the cross, because that's what it cost to rescue you and me from our selfish arrogance. Only in his resurrection did he reveal his glory, but even then, it wasn't for him. It was always and only for you and me.

The Lord of free and faithful grace did everything and still does! **“The remnant of Israel will no longer do wrong or tell lies; a deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will pasture and lie down, with nothing to make them afraid.”** So is God saying that once we have become his followers, we won't sin anymore? Not exactly. Whereas before you and I were only capable of doing what was self-centered and sinful in God's sight, God the Holy Spirit planted saving faith in our hearts through his Word. That faith grows through hearing and studying that Word and through partaking of his Holy Supper. That faith serves as a funnel or conduit by which God gives us all his blessings—including a new life in him. Now you and I can serve our Lord with true and willing humility compelled by Christ's love for us. You and I can genuinely love our neighbors as ourselves. Our thoughts and words and actions can reflect God's will rather than our own selfish will. Why? As God said through his prophet Ezekiel (36:26), **“I will remove from you a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”** See, our God has done it again!

In the end, he also gives us peace. In the Bible, you often see the picture of a flock resting peacefully under the care of their faithful shepherd. The Lord of grace does the same for you and me. Through the care of our Good Shepherd Jesus, he brings peace into our lives and removes every reason for fear. Now, even when life is troubling and difficult, we still have peace in Jesus.

It is hard to be humble, isn't it? The life of a believer following Jesus on the path to heaven is humbling to say the least. Yet look at what our God has done and continues to do for us! Yes, he exposes our natural arrogance

in all its ugliness and he forces us to realize we can offer him nothing, but he lifts our eyes to the One who can and does. He points us to the Lamb of God who conceals us from the fierce anger of God, who changes our hearts and minds purifying them of sin's arrogance. So we follow that humble Lamb. We serve him humbly, and we rejoice in the peace he brings. Amen.