

Pentecost 18 / September 22, 2024

James 4:10

*“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you.”*

### **Humble yourselves that the Lord may exalt you**

Humility is a core concept in the teachings of Holy Scripture. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a parable of pride and humility. Two men, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector, pray at the Jerusalem temple. The Pharisee, a proud man, boasts of his piety and spiritual accomplishments. He says, *“I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I get.”* He thanked God that he was not a sinner like other men, especially not like the despised tax collectors, one of whom happened also to be praying nearby. The Pharisee didn’t confess any sins, rather he proclaimed his righteousness to God and probably to everyone within earshot. Nearby stood the tax collector, vilified and hated not simply because people don’t like paying taxes, but mostly because they were agents of the occupying Romans and used force to extort extra funds from helpless tax payers. He would not even raise his head to heaven, but beat his breast and humbly sought forgiveness, saying, *“God be merciful to me a sinner.”* Jesus said it was the tax collector alone who returned home forgiven. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

James says, *“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you.”* Humble and humiliation are forms of the same word. Humiliation is the experience of being humbled by others rather than by ourselves. Jesus once observed how guests at a banquet chose seats, seeking the best for themselves. That’s fine when we pay for our seating. But when the event is by invitation and seating is at the host’s discretion, the guest runs the risk of being demoted to a lesser seat. Jesus says, *“When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honour, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you with shame will begin to take the lower place.”* A person would be humiliated to be moved to a lower place and honoured to be raised to a higher place. In such a situation it would be best to humble ourselves so that we are not humiliated, but perhaps honoured if our host asks us to move to better seats. The Lord exalts all who humble themselves in repentance and come to Him for mercy in the humility of faith.

Humility is to appreciate our place in relationship to God. In the Old Testament there was no one greater than Abraham. He was the first person to whom the Lord revealed Himself as God. He was the one through whom God began to create a people for Himself, through whom He would bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. Abraham had a special relationship with God, but Abraham always approached God in the humility of faith. He always remembered that he was the created and God was the Creator. When he pleaded with God for Sodom and Gomorrah, he said, *“Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.”* God is the Creator. We are the created. When we draw near to Him in the humility of faith, He draws near to us with mercy for the sake of Christ Jesus.

Job is the most famous sufferer of the Old Testament. He sought an audience with God to question Him as to why He made Him suffer. When he received his audience, he was overwhelmed by God’s majesty. He confessed he had spoken words without knowledge. He was in no position to judge God. He said, *“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”* He humbled himself in repentance and God exalted him and restored his blessing sevenfold. The Lord gave Job insight into the limitations of our knowledge of His ways in the world. He is the Creator. We are the created. The most important thing God gave Job was faith that He abides with us in our suffering and works for a greater purpose in the world and in our lives than we now know. God gave Job faith to believe that in all things He works for the good of those who love Him. He draws near to those who draw near to Him in the humility of faith.

It’s our sinful nature to exalt ourselves at the expense of others. James uses strong language to speak against the way people, especially believers, use our natural abilities and personal resources to humiliate others and exalt ourselves. He identifies the problem as the sinful nature that remains within us even after our incorporation into the body of Christ through Holy Baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to walk in newness of life. He asks, *“What causes fights and what causes quarrels among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”* We are all influenced by the ways of the world, tempted by the devil and our sinful nature. James warns us to resist them, saying, *“Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”* The world, the devil and our sinful nature are bitter enemies of God. They want to lead us away from God, dismiss His word and abandon His ways. James reminds us that the way of the world, the devil

and our sinful nature ends in death. James warns us to be aware of the spiritual dangers within us and around us. He calls us to turn to God in repentance in the humility of faith that He may raise us up in forgiveness and lead us to walk in newness of life along paths of peace. There are many paths that lead to destruction. There's only one way that leads to life. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We come to the Father through Him.

Jesus certainly didn't approve of the high-handed ways in which tax collectors dealt with their fellow Jews when collecting Roman taxes. He may even have felt that the taxes were excessively high and oppressive. He certainly didn't condone the thievery of the tax collectors, who took far more than Rome authorized. He called them to repent. When they came to Him in the humility of faith He exalted them in forgiveness. Jesus didn't have any argument with the ritual laws of Israel or the observance of the Pharisees. He came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. It was good the Pharisees didn't lie, cheat and steal. It was good that they fasted and gave tithes of all they received. However, it was wrong when they used those things to humiliate others and exalt themselves before God. He called them to repent. When they repented and came to Him in the humility of faith, He exalted them in forgiveness. Jesus is the way to life. When we come to Him in the humility of faith, He raises us up in forgiveness in time and to the fullness of life in eternity.

Abraham humbly acknowledged his humanity in the humility of faith, as He pleaded with the Lord for Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus humbled Himself more fully. He shared our humanity. He made Himself dust and ashes for our salvation. Abraham pleaded for Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus took the place of Sodom and Gomorrah, suffering death on the cross for the sins of the world. Job may be the great sufferer of the Old Testament, but Job's suffering pales in comparison to the suffering Jesus endured on the cross as He paid the debt for our sin and the sin of the world.

Abraham and Job humbled themselves before God and God exalted them according to His purposes for the salvation of the world. When you think of them, consider the humility of faith God calls us to. When you consider the humility of faith God calls us to, consider also the humility of Christ. He who was God from eternity, humbled Himself to share our humanity that He might earn our salvation through the humiliation of death on the cross. He calls us to Himself in the humility of faith. He says, "*Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. 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.*" The Lord exalts those who come to Him for mercy in the humility of faith, for the sake of Christ Jesus. God bless us always to come to Him through faith in Christ Jesus and bless us to live in the kindness of His love until faith is fulfilled in the exaltation of eternal life. In Jesus' Name. Amen