

**Sunday, 21 August 2016**

[Who wouldn't want to be a prophet?](#)

[Jeremiah 1:4-10](#)

There is a pattern in the Bible that we often see when prophets first receive their call from God. God calls the prophet. Then the prophet will protest that they should not be the one to do what God is asking. God then reassures them that He will be with them to help them carry out their task.

I find it very interesting that these faithful people show a reluctance to respond to God's call. When God first calls Moses out of the burning bush, Moses responds, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Ex 3:11); "What if they do not believe me or listen to me ... I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and tongue... Please send someone else" (Ex 4:1, 10, 13). We see a similar reluctance from Jeremiah who responds to God's call saying, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young" (Jer1:6). In addition to Moses and Jeremiah, we see this reluctance in the stories of Gideon, Saul, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. ... We see this in the lives of saints as well. St. Augustine of Hippo was dragged against his will to his ordination as bishop.

Certainly, being God's prophet is a rare privilege, and so in some ways reluctance is a bit of a surprising response. There can be a certain prestige to being a prophet. People listen attentively to the prophet who they believe hears messages directly from God. If the prophet is speaking positive words from God then

the prophet is much loved and respected. This desire to be regarded with honour and to have people's attention has sometimes led to the rise of false prophets. False prophets speak the words people want to hear rather than the words God wants to be communicated. They like the spotlight. False prophets desire to please people. They speak falsely declaring peace when disaster is on its way. ... The desire to be held in high regard by the people as a prophet who speaks the words of God can be powerful. Sometimes their desire to please people overpowers their ability to give an accurate word from God.

Certainly there is an attractive side to being God's prophet, but there are also reasons people would not want to be a prophet. Quite often they speak words from God that seem foolish. Their words sometimes go against the grain. Sometimes the words they speak are not pleasing to hear. Prophets often point out sin and corruption that has been accepted as normal, or which is hidden. Sometimes they bring upsetting messages that point towards future destruction. Their message is often countercultural. ... And because their message is not pleasing to the people the prophet will sometimes be persecuted and rejected, sometimes even killed. This might be why many of the prophets felt reluctant to accept God's call. The life of a prophet is not an easy life.

I sometimes think of the difference between true and false prophets as being something like the difference between a good acquaintance and a good friend. Acquaintances generally want to make you feel good and they usually want a peaceful relationship, so they will say nice things about you, or at least they won't say anything negative. They might even bend the

truth a little in order to make you feel good. It is kind. A good friend, however, will tell you the truth- even if that truth is hard to hear. A good friend will encourage you, but they will also give you a kick in the pants when you need it. And speaking that hard word will be difficult for a good friend because they care about you. (If an acquaintance criticizes you it doesn't often involve much pain on their part- or, if it does, it is has more to do with the discomfort of the situation.) A good friend will tell you what you need to hear, but not always what you want to hear. ... That is what a prophet will do. They will tell you what you need to hear from God, but not necessarily what you want to hear.

This was certainly true of the prophet Jeremiah. He was called the "weeping prophet". He was given the difficult task of calling the people back to God or be destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. It was a difficult task because it was bad news the people didn't want to hear, which naturally brings opposition and rejection, but it was also hard because he saw the pain they were about to walk into. He was like a man yelling at people he loves who were about to walk off the edge of a cliff, but they laugh at him and wave him off. Eventually, things became so bleak that his prophetic message was about two choices- go into exile at the hands of the Babylonian Empire, or resist and be killed.

The reluctance of the prophets to respond to God's call might have something to do with having to speak difficult words to people who would rather not hear them. ... But, I think there is also something else going on here. Numbers 12:3 says that "Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else

on the face of the earth”. I don’t think it is a coincidence that Moses was considered was both extremely humble and one of the greatest prophets to walk the earth. There is something about humility that allows God to work through us in particularly powerful ways.

As we read through the Bible there are certain general principles about God’s character that are expressed. One of these principles is God’s desire to work through the humble. In the book of Proverbs we read (3:34) “God opposes the proud, but shows favour to the humble”. ... What is it about humility that matters so much?”

One way to answer this is to look at the opposite of humility, which is pride. Pride has been called the root of all Sin. It is that part of us that turns away from God and rejects Him thinking we can do better on our own. Pride is feeling better or more important than other people. Pride causes us to use people for our own ends. It is essentially selfishness. It is pride that caused Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. And it is pride that ultimately leads us to all other sin. In stealing we think we deserve to have something someone else has. In murder we believe we have the power to decide if someone should live or die. In not honouring the Sabbath or our parents we believe we are self-entitled and deserving of what we have received and so have no desire to give thanks and respect. All sin has pride as its root.

We should say something about pride and self-esteem. In our society we often think the root of a person’s negative behavior is their negative view of themselves- which we often call bad self-

esteem. Usually what people feel inferior about, however, has nothing to do with a sense of moral or spiritual lack. The Jewish Psychologist Solomon Schimmel says, “Although many people suffer from feelings of inferiority, it is not usually because of their sense of moral or spiritual inadequacy. They don’t typically ruminate about how unkind, dishonest, or insensitive they might be, but about how incompetent, ugly, or professionally unsuccessful they are. They do not aspire to greater virtue but to greater recognition. This sense of inferiority and self-deprecation is not what the moralists want to cultivate as the basis for humility. On the contrary, the person who feels inferior about his social status, wealth, or looks is accepting values which from the religious point of view are inappropriate as a criteria for evaluating true self-worth. What the moralists want us to feel inferior about are our ethical, moral, and spiritual faults.”[\[1\]](#)

If pride is where all sin originates, then it makes sense that the opposite of pride, humility, would be the source of all virtue. Humility is marked by selflessness, and respect. Humility is not depression or self-hate. Humility is seeing yourself clearly before God. Humility is being aware of your limitations and sins, but it does not mean rejecting your strengths. It means the reason you do something is less about you and more about others. Humility is not a tall person pretending he is short. Or, a smart person pretending she is dumb. It is seeing yourself as you are before God. It is remembering that you are mud made into the image of God. Humility is recognizing that we are creatures-created by an amazingly wise, powerful, and loving God. Humility is recognizing that we are His and that He knows how best to live and that He deserves our love, respect, and service.

Humility is the natural position of the human heart in the presence of God. The saints thought humility was so important St. Augustine said, “Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues, hence, in the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue except in mere appearance.”

Christ was the perfect example of humility. He is the King of kings, but was born as a human baby to poor parents and laid in an animal’s feeding trough. Christ did not deny the reality of who he was. He did not have low self-esteem or pretend he wasn’t the son of God. Humility is seeing yourself accurately. That is how Jesus can say “before Abraham was, I AM” (Jn 8:58) and say in the gospel according to Matthew (11:29), “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.” There is no contradiction between his knowing he is the son of God and being humble. In Paul’s letter to the Philippians Christ’s humility is set as an example for us (Phil 2:8)- “being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!” Jesus selflessly places the good of others and the glory of God before his own wellbeing and comfort. Jesus also instructs his students saying, (Matt 23:12) “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus exalted humble fishermen and tax collectors and made them his apostles. He ate with outcasts and those on the fringe of society. Jesus valued humility greatly and so did his early followers.

St. Paul says (Romans 12:3) “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to

each of you.” Paul is teaching us to see ourselves accurately. The development of humility was extremely important for the early church.

The pursuit of humility has been a major pursuit by Christians throughout history. It is the historic belief of the church that humility is essential for a person to be used by God in a powerful and ongoing way. So Christians have sought to purify their hearts and minds from egotistical actions and desires so they can better be used by God and so they can be drawn closer to Him. Through a variety of practices, like prayer and fasting, Christians have sought to learn that they are completely reliant on God for their existence. They want to live in that knowledge at all moments. Of course the Holy Spirit is already working in us to draw us to humility, but this is where we can be effective with our effort. When we work with the Holy Spirit and allow ourselves to be made humble by the Spirit we will become like someone kneeling before God with our hands open and empty. When our hands are not full of our own ego then God fills them.

It is this empty-handed humility that we see in Jeremiah and that is why God can use him so effectively. If Jeremiah was made to be a prophet, but was full of his own pride, then it would be easy for him to not hear God and hear his own desires instead. If he was full of his own pride, then he might use God’s message to gain wealth or prestige instead of glorifying God and calling people to serve Him. If God was to try to use Jeremiah when he was full of his own egotistical desires, then he would not be able to handle the desire to misuse God’s power living in him. Only a humble self-less person is capable of having God’s power dwelling in them and not being overcome by the desire to twist

that power to their own ends.

The philosopher Peter Kreeft said it this way, “Spiritually, our strength is our receptivity, our active passivity to God, our emptiness ... if we come to God with empty hands, he will fill them. If we come with full hands, he finds no place to put himself. It is our beggary, our receptivity, that is our hope.”[\[2\]](#)

Jeremiah’s reluctance is evidence of his humility. Jeremiah recognized his humanity before God’s power. Jeremiah knew his people and knew that God would ask him to do something that was not in his power to accomplish. Jeremiah knew that he had nothing within himself to accomplish the task. Only God’s power working through him could do what God was asking.

It is the way of God to use the humble to do great things- To use a shepherd boy who was the smallest of his brothers to be the greatest king of Israel- To take a group of slaves and make them His chosen people- to use fishermen and tax collectors to be his apostles- to use a man on a cross to bring salvation to the world. I wonder what God could do with a little church?