

**Humility  
and  
Saving Faith**

*And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life. I receive not honour from men. But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you. I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive. How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only? (John 5:40-44 KJV)*

At the outset of this study, I would like to ask each of you some simple questions: are you a humble person? Do you consider yourself a humble person? Do you think other people consider you a humble person? Think about these things as we go along in the study and see what a trap is laid for you in these questions. For, if you're inclined to think you're pretty humble or that other people would consider you humble, then you have some sense of boasting in your humility and you've revealed the insidious nature of pride in the heart.

We know the story of the Pharisee and the publican, who went up to pray. Let's ask them.

First, this man --

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. (Luke 18:11-12)

Here is surely a humble man! Do you see how thankful he is to God for having formed him and made him to live and walk in holiness before Him? Isn't he careful to give God the glory as the source of all good? Isn't he careful to submit to all of God's commandments, even to the tithing of mint? Surely this is a humble man before God! Isn't he? I'm sure if we could ask him, he would be happy to talk about his humility. I'm sure he would tell us how much he daily humbles himself before the Lord. Do you know anyone like this? ..... Do we know people like this? .... If so, we need to hear this: "Wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself" (Rom 2:1).

What about the other man?

But the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. (Luke 18:13)

This one is not taking questions. He is not there to make a "fair shew of the flesh" (Gal 6:12). His eyes are cast down and his spirit is broken within him. He neither heard the Pharisee noisily come in nor did he see him quietly slipped out. This publican sinner was too broken in spirit to hear or pay attention to anyone other than the Living God in relation to his desperate need.

Jesus said of this latter man, this publican, this sinner, that he "went down to his house justified." Jesus emphasizes it, "I say to you, this man went down to his house justified." The word 'justified' is used here in its full forensic sense. Gill says he was "accounted as a righteous person in the sight of God; justified from all his sins, and accepted by him, when the other was abhorred and neglected." So, we are forced to understand that this sinner was accounted as righteous through his faith in the Mediator. His faith was saving faith since only saving faith is

justifying faith. But what is the main point of the passage? It's not about justification by faith but rather humility. That is, Jesus states the main point in saying, "every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." Habakkuk wrote, "Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him" but by contrast "the just shall live by his faith" (Hab 2:4).

In the verse before us now, Jesus asks the question, "How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?" Here, we're confronted again with a curious connection between saving faith and humility. In this verse, though, the ideas are expressed negatively: receiving honor one of another is the negation of humility and not being able to believe is the negation of saving faith. With the Pharisee and the publican, the idea was of humility as the heart of justifying faith. Here, in effect, Jesus says, without true humility, there can be no saving faith.

But isn't receiving honor one from another something we all do? Isn't it something that we've done since we were children? As children we naturally sought the approval of our parents at first and then of our friends. As adults, we've become extremely adept and almost oblivious to the giving and receiving of honor. The desire to gain approval is so deep-rooted in us that it seems as if it is woven into the very fabric of our consciousness. This wickedness is what drives all of social media. We feel elated when we get a Like or a Share. We feel slighted, angered, unhappy when we aren't honored as we think we should be. We are even clever enough to honor others so that they will honor us in return. We constantly compare ourselves with others and put them down in order to extract honor for ourselves at their expense. We can do all this sub-consciously, as our thoughts ramble on within ourselves. All this deep-grained mental habit of seeking honor stands in the way of belief in Christ. Jesus said so.

But doesn't all this seem a little over the top to you? You ask, "What is so bad about seeking a little approval from others? We all do this, right? Aren't we even hard-wired to do this? How can doing what I'm hard-wired to do prevent me from having saving faith? What is so hard about believing the gospel anyway? Can't anyone just believe anytime they want? Aren't I already a believer?" These are all natural questions. But, in the text before us today, Jesus is emphatic, "How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?"

So, to unpack this text, the plan is to first consider the idea of saving faith, what it is, what it does and what it isn't, then to examine the connection between humility and saving faith. Then hopefully the Holy Spirit will make some application of what Jesus is saying here to our hearts.

## **I. Saving Faith**

What is saving faith? J. Grehsam Machen wrote, that "faith is a mystery to us who possess it; it is ridiculed by those who have it not. But if possessed it overcomes the world. In Christ all things are ours" (Machen, What is Faith?). Ok, but what is saving faith? In the simplest

sense of the words, it is believing the gospel. Jesus said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life” (John 6:47). That sounds simple enough. But what does it mean to “believe on Him”? What really is saving faith? Even with a good sense of it by experience, it is difficult to put into words. We know that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:17) and that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). We know that “it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:9) and “precious” (2 Peter 1:1) and that “the just shall live by his faith” (Hab 2:4). We know that “the victory that overcometh the world, [is] even our faith” (1 John 5:4). We know all these things about saving faith but still we have a difficult time putting down in words exactly what it is.

So, let’s turn slightly from considering what saving faith is, to consider what saving faith does, in its most basic function. Our Confession says that “the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life” (WCF, 14.2). That is the heart and soul of what saving faith is – that in us which receives and rests upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification and eternal life. There is, then, in the nature and essence of saving faith, a receiving of the object of faith, not only in the assent of the judgment, but with the whole heart, that is, with the inclination and volition of the soul.

Saving faith is then is justifying faith because it reception of Christ with the whole man – the whole heart, that is:.

True saving faith is a reception of Christ in the whole man, in all his faculties -- the intellect, the affections and the will -- not in some faculties and not others: as in the intellect only but neither in the affections nor in the will; and not in some partial measure or degree: but over all, such that He becomes all-in-all. He will ultimately accept of nothing less. His glory He will not share with another, and that includes you, and me, and all of us. But this is the only way for us, to be crushed, broken in spirit and truly humbled. Thus, true saving faith involves the whole man, “which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Col 3:10) and also “which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Ephesians 4:24). Thus we have the three faculties: knowledge of our intellect, righteousness of our wills, and the holiness of our affections are the three aspects of saving faith.

How dreadful is anything which would keep us from eternal life! How dreadful is our condition which by nature does that which prevents coming to Christ!!! What a terror of a situation, when pride within and the devil without hurry us on to our eternal ruin. Pride possesses the entirety of man, until man has his entirety from Christ. In verse 40, Jesus said, “ye will not come to me, that ye might have life” and that because they seek glory from one another.

#### **a. False Forms of Faith**

If true saving faith leads to the reception of Christ in all the faculties of man, then non-saving faith can be characterized by a partial reception of Him in some faculties but not in others.

Those who exalt the will apart from an illuminated intellect would be like the Jews, who had a zeal for God but not according to knowledge” (Rom 10:2). Modern Pentecostalism is heavy on the affections but very light on will and on the intellect. There is a zeal for experience but being without knowledge makes it apt to veer off into ungodly forms of worship. By contrast, many among the Reformed are illuminated with a generally sound knowledge of the gospel but among these are few who have a burning affection for Christ. There is theological soundness in prayers are rote and preaching is dry, worship is lifeless.

We would call those who have knowledge and affections yet not the will “antinomians”. These might preach the doctrines of grace and be lively in prayer and worship yet continue to live in outright rebellion against God. Jude calls these “trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots;” (Jude 1:12).

The faculty of will can be undermined by either mixed affections or double-mindedness. John wrote that “among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue” (John 12:42). Their desire to seek honor from men prevented them from wholly believing in Christ. They were not willing to be dishonored for Christ because they preferred the honor from men. Though it says they believed in Jesus, yet either their affections for Him were too weak or their understanding was superficial.

Jonathan Edwards wrote, “There are false affections, and there are true. A man's having much affection, does not prove that he has any true religion: but if he has no affection, it proves that he has no true religion.” This is a brilliant observation and it can be extended to each of the three faculties. If a person has no desire to understand Scripture, then he has not saving faith. Likewise, if a man does make those choices which bring honor to Him by obeying Him no matter the personal cost, then that person's saving faith is as yet defective.

True saving faith requires a lively intellect, holy affections and will. Non-saving faith comes in many varieties - let's examine some of the possibilities.

#### **b. Historical faith**

- i. Faith in God's revelation of grace in Christ may be related to the subject as the mere object of knowledge, so that faith is merely an intellectual conviction, based on the witness of testimony, as to the truth of the facts of revelation, but for that reason does not have the power to renew a man, because the truth of revelation is regarded as something indifferent to one's real personal interests. As James wrote, “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble” (James 2:19). We've all read of the demons making good confessions, “I

know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). “And unclean spirits, when they saw him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God” (Mark 3:11). Can we see ourselves in this? Many of us went to church for years, making good confessions with our lips but yet having no real, personal, abiding interest in Christ. Though we may have had a good understanding of Scripture, we had no affection for Him, no will to obey Him, certainly not to suffer for Him. We hated Him as truly as did those demons, though we would never have admitted it. We hated Him without a cause because our own hearts were evil – and we were blinkered by our pride.

**c. Temporal faith**

- i. Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. (Luke 8:14)
- ii. The seed of the word, when sown upon the thorny ground, is choked by the cares, riches, and pleasures of life. The affections are set on other things than Christ. Christ has been received in the intellect and somewhat in the will perhaps, but has not been received in a fundamental way into the affections. These can say they understand the doctrines and believe them or wish to believe and obey them, but they allow the things of earth to get such hold upon their minds, that they leave no room for the word of God to do its work. And hence it follows that however many sermons they hear, they never seem to make any spiritual progress. A weekly process of excuse-making goes on within. “I don’t need more of Christ. I’m doing pretty well. That was a good sermon though. Oh yeah, I’d better not forget to pick up a few things on the way home from church!” These bring no fruit to maturity.
- iii. Now, our affections may be melted, even on account of Christ and the gospel; yet that is no infallible evidence of a regenerate heart. And that is because we’ve seen all sorts of affections manifested by such as have turned out to be only temporary believers. The stony ground hearers in the parable “received the word with joy,” and so too were John the Baptist’s hearers “willing for a season to rejoice in his light” (John 3: 35).
- iv. Jonathan Edwards writes of those “who have been exceedingly raised with religious affections, and think they have been converted, but they do not seem any more convinced of the truth of the gospel, than they used to be; or at least, there is no remarkable alteration. They do not live under the influence and power of a realizing conviction of the infinite and eternal things which the gospel reveals; if they were, it would be impossible for them to live as they do. Because their affections are not

attended with a thorough conviction of the mind, they are not at all to be depended on.”

- v. The cares, riches, and pleasures of life which choke out the seed in our lives spring from our desire to receive honor from one another. We dedicate ourselves to seeking the approval of others, real or even imaginary. If we can't find real people to give us approval, we fabricate them, we meet them online. We post on social media and gather in clubs with those of like prideful mind to receive honor from men.

**d. Salvation is of the Lord**

- i. And so, to conclude this section – a failure of renewal in any of the three faculties of our nature, the intellect, affections and will, results in a defective saving faith, which is no saving faith at all, because it produces no fruit.
- ii. The deficiency of each variation of faith we've examined arises from an exclusion of some aspect of the self by the self for the self. “Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost” (Acts 7:51). No outward instruction, not even of Christ Himself; no arguments, however convincing; no sense of the beauty of humility, however deep; no personal resolve or effort, however sincere and earnest, can cast out this devil of pride. Self cannot cast out self.
- iii. The flesh profits nothing in all this. It has no natural affection for the things of God, no innate understanding of the mysteries of the gospel, no native ability to subject itself to the will of God. The flesh is ruled by fleshly lusts, blinded by insidious pride which lurks in the affections, twisting them and corrupting every volition. The law may terrify our hearts with fear, but it is only by grace that sweet humility becomes a joy to the soul and the essential Christlike character of humility the reality of our new nature.
- iv. And so the story of the Bible is simply this – by seeking for glory man was brought low into shame and eternal ruin and by the humility of Christ he is raised up from the dung heap to be seated with Christ in highest exaltation. The universal law of Christ's Kingdom is this, “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt 23:12).
- v. And so we have the perfect example of what must be formed in us in order for us to exercise saving faith, nothing less than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself – we must have the mind of Christ – He made himself of no reputation, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame. Therefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name. It is a humility unto death that is

required – a death to self, a union with Christ in His death, of joyfully bearing His reproach. We need to sink down into our own nothingness and meekly, humbly, prayerfully, trustfully receive and rest in the One who does all things well FOR US. This is true humility and saving faith.

## **II. Humility as the Essence of Saving Faith**

- a. Humility and saving faith are closely related in Scripture and in reality though the two ideas are not so commonly considered together, at least as far as I have seen. I would like to offer the idea that humility is really the essence of saving faith. In the first part, I tried to highlight how defects in our saving faith may be reflected in defects in our humility, and how Christ's perfect humility needs to be seen as the heart and soul of our hearts and souls. We have two specific cases in the gospels in which Jesus spoke of great faith. Both were of Gentiles, and both involved a profound and pervasive humility.
- b. The first is the story of the woman of Canaan in Matt 25:25-28.
  - i. Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw [it] to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great [is] your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:25-28)
  - ii. In what do we see the greatness of the woman's faith? We can discern in her some understanding of who Jesus was, and a steadfast intention to secure a blessing for her daughter and herself. Jesus tested her affections by comparing her to a little dog unworthy to receive of the children's bread. Yet her affections never wavered, nor deviated from her purpose. She rather went lower down at the Lord's words. "Yes, Lord ..." The greatness of this woman's faith was expressed in the greatness of her humility.
- c. The second case of great faith is another Gentile, the Roman centurion, in Luke 7
  - i. "Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. "For I also am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does [it]." When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" (Luke 7:7-9 NKJV)
  - ii. In what do we see the greatness of the centurion's faith? Is it not in his entire abasement before the Lord? First, he did not consider himself worthy to come to meet him. Then, on further consideration, he realized

he was even less worthy to have the Lord come under his roof. And so he sent his servants to ask Jesus to merely say the word, and his servant would be healed. There is no ostentation, no desire of making a fair show in the flesh, to receive glory and honor from men. No, his concern and his affection was for the Lord's honor, that He might not debase Himself by coming into the house of a Gentile dog such as himself.

- iii. The centurion's faith was great because his humility was great. His humility was the entire absence of self-concern and abasement of self and nothing but a complete trust in God. His affections were for the honor and glory of Christ and nothing for himself.
- d. Now we come to the main point of all this. Given that saving faith is that which receives and rests upon Christ alone for salvation, it should be clear that the nature of this faith must involve a sense of entire abasement before God, and an awareness of utter helplessness and desperate need, emptiness, darkness, ruin. Saving faith must receive all of Christ, in all parts and all faculties of the soul, without reserve. And so humility is the essential aspect of saving faith involving the emptying of self, a crucifixion of self that Christ might be our all-in-all.
- e. It is from our pride that we need to be redeemed. Our awareness of the need for redemption will largely depend on our knowledge of the terrible nature of the power of pride in our hearts. Insofar as we feel the deadly presence of the first Adam within us, so much must we feel our need for the second Adam and His life to be formed within us as the power of His humility – a real, abiding humility, which conquers pride by emptying self seeking honor for self. Only when we feel the utter destitution of having been sold under sin (Romans 7:14) can we feel the full sense of the words that "in me dwelleth no good thing" (Rom 7:18). Until you've struggled for humility, it's hard to have a sense of our self-satisfaction. And without a sense of our emptiness, of our humiliation and destitution, without the death of the flesh, Christ can never become our inner life. Different people may have different senses of this but the answer is always the same: to have the life of Christ in us, we must be broken and contrite in spirit.
- f. Blessed are the poor in Spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are they who mourn for their sins. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness. He pours "water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground" (Is 44:3). "He turneth the howling waste into a standing water, and dry ground into watersprings" (Psalm 107:35). To be self-emptied, to be in a state of humility, is the indispensable condition for the reception of the "grace which bringeth salvation": mourning precedes comfort and the earnest hungerings and thirstings after righteousness are satisfied by the gracious gift of Christ Himself, implanted within the soul in the wondrous work of the new birth.
- g. Scripture commands us to humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord (James 4:10) and under God's mighty hand (1 Peter 5:6) and so we must. But it is too easy to

think we humble ourselves before God. And so humility towards men will be the only proof that our humility before God is real. "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (1 John 4:20)

- h. We are commanded that we should "in lowliness of mind esteem others better than ourselves" (Phil 3:2). Yet someone might ask, how we can count others better than ourselves, when we see that they are not better than us in knowledge, gifts, wisdom? The question itself proves at once how little we understand what real lowliness of mind is. True humility comes, not in comparing ourselves with others, but when, in the light of God, we see ourselves to be nothing whatsoever and so we consent to part with and cast away self, in order that we might gain all of Christ so that He might be all-in-all for us.
- i. This is the Son of God who laid aside his garments to wash His disciples' feet, as would a common slave. He stooped to wash the feet of each one, of James, John and Simon Peter graciously, and then, he even washed the feet of Judas, knowing that it was written -- "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me" (Psalm 41:9 KJV). And Christ's final and full humiliation followed hard on the heels of this event. His humility gave His death its value, because He had to willingly take our place. And now, our salvation is nothing less than a communication of His life and death to us through union with Him. His humility is our salvation.
- j. And so, true saving faith leads to a full reception of Christ. A full reception of Christ implies the entire emptying of self, the end of the self, the death of the self via participation in the utter humiliation of the death of Christ, so that the power of His resurrection, which brought life from the dead, can flood the howling waste places of our souls with the whole glory of God. It was into the void and darkness of the first creation, to which God spoke the words "Let there be light" (Gen 1:2) and it is must be into the black void of our truly humbled souls to which that same word comes -- He shines the light of His own glorious image in the Person of His own dear Son (2 Cor 4:6) by the Holy Spirit.

### **III. Applications**

#### **a. For the unbeliever:**

- i. Are you pleased with receiving honor and displeased with receiving dishonor? Of course you are! And so, Jesus asks, how can you ever believe? I often ask myself, have I really believed? Have you really believed? We must seek the glory that comes from God alone, through Christ. We must seek to understand the greatness of this God in His incomprehensibly glory. We are infinitesimal cosmic specks who have fallen under an infinite penalty. Our due is the everlasting wrath of the infinite God on whom we wholly depend. Until we consider the honor

and dishonor of men as insignificant against the infinite value of God's honor and dishonor, we will never come to see the need for our utter humiliation before Him.

- ii. Calvin asks, "what means is there of humbling us if we do not make way for the mercy of God by our utter indigence and destitution? For I call it not humility, so long as we think there is any good remaining in us."  
(Calvin, Institutes, III.12.6)

b. For the believer:

- i. This humility is not a thing that will develop of itself, but it must be made the object of special desire, prayer, faith, and practice. Work on your own humility and you will learn that there is nothing more subtle or deceptive than pride. The sense of our weakness against pride must lead to a deeper dependence upon Christ, to deeper knowledge of Him, deeper affection for Him and deeper submission to Him. The path to victory in the Christian life is downward, into the death of Christ, so that His humility may be manifest in us and so put to death our insidious pride.
- ii. But beware, as Jonathan Edwards wrote, "There is a pretended great humiliation, being dead to the law, and emptied of self, which is one of the most elated things in the world. Some there are, who have made great profession of experience of a thorough work of the law on their own hearts, and of being brought fully off from works whose conversation has savoured most of a self-righteous spirit, of any that ever I had opportunity to observe. Some, who think themselves quite emptied of themselves, confident that they are abased in the dust, are full as they can hold with the glory of their own humility, and lifted up to heaven with a high opinion of their abasement.
- iii. Much of what is commonly called humility in Christian circles is rather a subtle means of receiving of honor from one another. For persons to be truly emptied of themselves, poor in spirit, and broken in heart, is quite another thing, and has other effects, than many imagine. It is astonishing how greatly many are deceived about themselves as to this matter, imagining themselves most humble, when they are most proud, and their behaviour is really the most haughty. The deceitfulness of the heart of man appears in no one thing so much, as this of spiritual pride and self-righteousness. (Edwards)

c. For both believer and unbeliever:

- i. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another? The only thing that can cure you of the desire for man's praise or the hurt feelings and anger which come when it is not given, is by seeking the glory that comes only from God. Let His glory be everything to you. And out of our nothingness, by His grace and goodness, the glory of God will shine. The

deeper we go in humility, in discovering our own weakness and shame, the more Christlike we become. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

- ii. Strive for humility. Cry out to God for humility. Seek the glory that only comes from God by receiving Christ in the mind, the affections and the will. Seek humility in Christ, in His lowly life and death. Humble yourself in Christ.