

**O Lord, it's hard to be humble**  
December 7, 2008 - Luke 1:39-56

It is hard *not* to be proud. Why? One reason is our heart naturally drifts toward it. Man or woman apart from God often aims to exalt themselves above others. We see this played out on an international scale when one nation initiates aggression against another. We see it at school when bullies try to climb to the top through intimidation. We've seen it in Ottawa this past week as politicians struggle for control over the nation's power. We see it in our hearts when we conclude we are better than that person or they are not worthy of our attention.

Pride is thinking more of ourselves than we ought. It comes from an unbalanced view of ourselves and/or God. Pride also gains ground in our lives when we begin to think less of God and more of ourselves.

The tough thing is people like to be in privileged positions or watch the privileged. There used to be a show on TV called "Lifestyles of the rich and famous." Viewers were treated to an inside view of luxury and wealth. If I came up with a show called "Lifestyles of the middle income and ordinary," how many people do you think

would be glued to their TV's? Entertainment News Shows focuses on hottest movie stars, rock stars and TV stars in Entertainment industry. I have never seen a feature on the lives of camera men, set builders and cafeteria workers in the movie studios.

But what is God's attitude towards all this? Who does He choose to do His work and carry out His plans; the proud or the humble?

If pride involves an unbalanced view of oneself and/or God, humility involves having a balanced view of who we are and who God is. It is not thinking too high or too low about oneself. It is thinking of ourselves as God sees us. On the one hand we are human beings created by Almighty God with all kinds of unique characteristics and abilities. On the other hand, we are sinners who live in rebellion towards him. We need His forgiveness and transforming work in our lives. We recognize all we have including resources, gifts and abilities comes from Him. Humble people have got a pretty good handle on this and live their lives struggling to maintain this balanced view of themselves. Now the question again is "who does God choose to do His work and carry out His plans; the proud or the humble?"

We approach Christmas this year through the eyes of the Gospel writer Luke. He gives a lot of time to Jesus' mother Mary. We focused last week on the angel Gabriel's announcement of God's plan to use Mary in a super way to accomplish His purposes. She will be with child by the Holy Spirit. The passage ended with Mary humbly accepting this role declaring "I am the Lord's maidservant." But what happened after that?

Well Luke began his gospel with another announcement of the birth of the Messiah's forerunner. The Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> century were looking for someone called the Messiah to save them from darkness. Their Scriptures, our Old Testament, promised this Deliverer and spoke of someone called the forerunner. He would announce the coming of the Messiah.

The same angel Gabriel announced this forerunner's birth to an older couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. Though Zechariah doubts God's ability to carry through on this proclamation, Elizabeth is pregnant by the end of that story and goes into seclusion for 5 months.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> month of her pregnancy, the same angel appears to Mary, who we met last week. The angel announces that she too would be having a baby under very unique circumstances; namely the virgin birth. So we will pick up the story following Gabriel's announcement to Mary. See if you can pick out God's attitude towards the proud and humble through this account.

We pick up the story today in Luke 1:39.

#### Mary Visits Elizabeth

**39** In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, **40** and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, **42** and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! **43** And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? **44** For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. **45** And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

#### Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat

**46** And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
**47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
**48** for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.  
 For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
**49** for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
 and holy is his name.  
**50** And his mercy is for those who fear him  
 from generation to generation.  
**51** He has shown strength with his arm;  
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
**52** he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
 and exalted those of humble estate;

**53** he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.

**54** He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,

**55** as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

**56** And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

To emphasize God’s power to Mary, the angel Gabriel told her that her relative Elizabeth was pregnant. This would be incredible news to Mary because Elizabeth was called barren. So she gets ready and hurries down to Judea to visit Elizabeth. The journey took four days. She arrives at Zechariah’s house and greets Elizabeth who has come out of seclusion. We don’t know if Elizabeth knew Mary was coming. Mary enters the house and greets Elizabeth. You don’t explain all the news in a greeting. You simply say hello. Mary was most likely not even showing. Yet remember, Elizabeth carries the forerunner of the Messiah in her womb. He is so anxious to start his ministry that he tries leaping right out of Elizabeth 3 months prematurely to point out that the Messiah is inside Mary.

Then Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit, and in a loud voice shouts this blessing. Now if we didn’t know better, we might think Elizabeth was talking about Queen Cleopatra or something. You may

have heard of Cleopatra; that famous Egyptian queen who had relationships with various Roman Emperors and was an extremely wealthy woman. If Cleopatra came by, Elizabeth would have had every right to exclaim “why am I so favored, to have you visit me.” But Elizabeth says this to Mary!

Little ole’ Mary. Here was this 13 or 14 year old girl, from a poor family from one of the most despised regions in Israel. You’d think her ticket out of poverty would involve marrying into money. But her guy was simply a hard working carpenter. We receive a glimpse into their poverty later when they present baby Jesus at the temple. They offered a dove. The only families allowed to offer this least expensive animal were poorest members of society. Yet this young poor girl is considered the guest of highest honor by Elizabeth. Here we see how God often works when looking for people to do His work.

*The all-powerful God lifts up the humble to accomplish His purposes.*

Mary came from a humble background. And she had a humble attitude. We saw this at the end of last week’s passage. Upon hearing the angel’s explanation about how she would come to be with child,

she says, “I am the Lord’s servant.” But Servant is too high of a title for the term Mary uses. It might be clearer to say “I am the Lord’s handmaiden; the lowest of the lowest when it comes to servants. Yet because Mary knew who God was and who she was, she was willing to offer herself humbly for His use.

Well Mary receives Elizabeth’s greeting. But then she comes up with something quite incredible herself. Mary’s song or the Magnificat as it is called in Latin is found in the next 9 verses. Now how could a 13 or 14 year old girl come up with this? Some think this song has to be a later insertion by an accomplished poet. Or could it be the deep thoughts of a humble girl who had four days to think as she traveled to meet Elizabeth? This prayer is similar to one found in the Old Testament which Mary would know. It’s the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. Mary may have reflected on that prayer and compiled these words from the Scriptures she heard in the synagogues and from the Rabbis. One predominant theme through this song is that God opposes the proud but exalts the humble.

We first see this in verse 48. After glorifying or magnifying the Lord, she praises God for being mindful of the humble state of his

servant. To be mindful means what the compound states; *to have a mind full of* or to have *on* one’s mind. God was mindful of this humble young woman in humble circumstances named Mary. And if God was mindful of her, you can be quite certain He is mindful of you. You are not insignificant to God. You are not lost in His inbox or relegated to the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet in His office.

He is mindful of that problem that weighs you down; of the crushing burden that life has laid on you; of that hurt in your heart; of that frustration with respect to your work; of the concern you have over your family member or children. We don’t have to do something impressive to get God’s attention or ascend to some height to gain an audience. He was mindful of this humble servant and He will be mindful of those who humble themselves before Him today.

But what if we don’t want to be humble? How does He view the proud? Well Mary comments on this in verse 51. “He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.” OUCH. I don’t know about you but there are some verses in the Bible that simply hurt when you read them. This one hurts me. When it comes to pride, I know God does not approve

of outward unhealthy pride. I know the Bible says that “he who humbles himself will be exalted and he who exalts himself will be lifted up.” But if there is one place I would like to reserve a little space for pride, it is my inner thoughts. Isn’t it okay to harbor some pride there where no one else will see?

Not according to God. “But all that God is going to do to those who harbor pride in their innermost thoughts is cluck his tongue and shake his head right?” What does the verse Mary quoted say that God is going to do to those who are proud in thought; scatter them? Being scattered is not an image of strength and prestige. Those who are scattered are defeated. Those who scatter run away in fear. God’s opposition towards the proud is a common theme throughout the Bible. The prophets direct many of their messages against proud kings, nations and people. The New Testament teaches “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Pride is no small thing to God, for “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall,” according to Proverbs 16:18. God is in the business of saving people from destruction.

So He won’t even let pride in the innermost thoughts go.

Innermost thoughts are close to our heart. So though they may be far removed from the sight of others, they are very close the essence of our soul. If we are prideful in our souls, then our whole being will be permeated with unhealthy pride.

Mary goes on to emphasize this point again and again. She notes God brings down rulers and lifts up the humble in verse 52. She declares how He fills the hungry who certainly don’t have anything to be proud of and sends the rich who have all the reasons in the world to be proud, away empty. (53) She concludes this song by praising the Lord for remembering little Israel. This small nation was no superpower. They never came close to being a world player. Yet just as God remembers his servant Mary, He was remembering this little nation by sending her a Deliverer.

This young woman named Mary reveals to us that God lifts up the humble to accomplish His will. The same was true when the baby she carried grew up. In reflecting on Jesus, an early Christian writer penned these words:

Philippians 2:5-8

<sup>5</sup>Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

<sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

Jesus' life and attitude are our pattern. Did you see "your attitude should be the same." But what if we don't want to do that?

What if we just want to be Christians that harbor a bit of pride in our hearts? "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5. So today, the text asks us "How are we doing on the pride thing? Are we proud in our inmost thoughts? Are we proud of our little kingdoms so we think we are better than others?

Proud of our riches? Too proud to believe that the Lord will accomplish His Word?

Can you imagine Mary responding to Gabriel's announcement with: "Actually, Gabe, it's cool that God wants to use me. But I don't really like the approach. I'd have to bear a lot of shame and do a lot of explaining his way. I'd like him to wait until after I'm married. And

by the way, how about a bit better life in return for doing God this favor? I mean, look at how we're living?" No, she just humbly accepted what the Lord had for her.

Pride is a spiritual disease. The remedy is humility. Take the remedy and God pours out His grace, mindfulness and mercy. Refuse the humility remedy and reap the opposition of God.

How do we humble ourselves?

- 1) Acknowledge who we are not – God. He is the Creator. He is all-powerful. He is Lord. He is worthy of being lifted up. He is rich in Spirit and truth.
- 2) Acknowledge who we are – Frail, created by God, finite, yet with a life of opportunity before us, limited in ourselves but unlimited in dependence on God, sinful human beings, yet forgiven by God's grace, in need of God's strength and help; for salvation from our sins and pride; for daily life; for crises in life and to help others in life.

Let us humble ourselves before the Lord as we come to His table. -