

## HUMBLE YOURSELF BEFORE THE LORD

A seminary professor, in teaching a course in church history, used the illustration more than once. He formed it as a question: "If you found a law code that expressly said, 'Citizens, under punishment of law, are not allowed to stick beans in their ears,' what could you reasonably assume?" Several of the first-year seminarians in the class, eager to demonstrate their wisdom, suggested, "The king didn't like beans." That was not at all the answer he wanted. Rather than having other class members reveal their ignorance, he offered an explanation. "If the law forbade citizens from sticking beans in their ears, you could reasonably assume that citizens were sticking beans in their ears. Otherwise, there would be no need for such a law." In other words, you can find in every law on the books of a country what at least some of the citizens of that country have done.

If that's the case, that commands reveal failings and propensities, then listen to this sampling of commands God has given in his Word and draw some conclusions. Romans 12:3: *"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought."* Philippians 2:3: *"In humility consider others better than yourselves."* 1 Peter 5:5: *"Clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"* Ephesians 4:2: *"Be completely humble and gentle."* James 4:10: *"Humble yourselves before the Lord."*

What can you conclude from those passages? What ought you conclude? How about this: There are a lot of people out there who have a real issue with pride? That's certainly true. You could probably come up with a long list of people who think of themselves way too highly. Considering the high percentage of unbelievers in this world, there's obviously a huge number of people who think of themselves too highly in relationship to God. But is that where it ends? Those words were written to the people of God, who fall prey to the same temptations. *"Pride goes before destruction,"* one of the Proverbs says. Rather than hand us over to the pride of our hearts and thus condemn us to an eternity apart from him, the Lord warns us against pride again and again. As we study this account from Numbers 16, the God of all grace offers this direction: **HUMBLE YOURSELF BEFORE THE LORD.**

The book of Numbers gets its name from the census that it records in the opening chapters of the book.

After giving his people his Law, not just the Ten Commandments, but laws to govern every aspect of their relationship with him as well as their fellow Israelites, the Lord directed them to count the number of fighting men available to engage in battle. There were a little more than 600,000 men between twenty and fifty years of age who were fit to fight. If you give each of the fighting men a spouse and 2.2 children, you have a nation of about 2.5 million. Add in the card-carrying members of AARP and there may have been 2.75 million. That large group traveled north from Mount Sinai to the Desert of Paran. From there Moses sent twelve spies to check out the land that God had promised to give them. All twelve spies agreed that the land was indeed rich and beautiful. Ten of those twelve spies, however, thought the people of the land were too many and too powerful to be defeated. When the people doubted the Lord's ability to bring them into the land, the Lord declared that no one over the age of 20 would enter Canaan, except Joshua and Caleb. They would spend the next forty years wandering.

By this time of wandering, the Lord had in mind to teach his people some important lessons about their life with him. At the top of the list of lessons was this: to humble themselves before the Lord, trusting his direction and submitting to his will. That such a lesson was particularly needed is clear from the account we consider this morning.

In the beginning of the chapter we hear that a man named Korah, a Levite, and two Reubenites named Dathan and Abiram had come to the conclusion that Moses and Aaron had gotten a little too big for their britches. They had gathered 250 leaders of the people who agreed with that thought. Sure, Moses was the one who had led the people out of Egypt. And yes, he had stretched out his hand over the Red Sea so that they could walk through on dry ground. And alright, he had been in the presence of God on Mount Sinai, so that his face shone when he came down. But still, they contended, Moses was thinking a little too highly of himself, keeping to himself rights that belonged to many more. I suppose some would say perception is reality and that, if 253 men accuse you of being arrogant you might just be arrogant. That wasn't, however, God's opinion. If you have your Bible open, turn back to chapter 12, verse 3, and look at the parenthetical note inspired by God himself: *"Now Moses was a very humble man, more*

*humble than anyone else on the face of the whole earth."*

Korah, a Levite, who by his lineage would have had an important role in the tabernacle, decided that such service was nowhere near enough for someone with his abilities. That meant it was time for a revolution to bring Moses down and lift himself up. So he, with the 250 community leaders, stood up against Moses. They presented the charge against Moses together. It's in verse three of this chapter: *"You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?"* Part of what they said was true, of course. This was God's special people, set apart from the nations around them. The Lord was indeed with them in a very special way. What wasn't true was that Moses and Aaron had placed themselves above the Lord's assembly. That was the Lord's doing. He was the One who had chosen Moses to lead the people and Aaron to serve as high priest. In other words, by taking their stand against Moses, they were doing something far more significant. They were taking their stand against the Lord himself.

At the Lord's command, Moses instructed Korah, Dathan, and Abiram to present themselves before the Lord. Each of them, along with the 250 community leaders, was to appear before the Lord with his censor. They did as they were directed, assuming that nothing would happen to them and the people would side with them against Moses. The Lord had news for them. They hadn't just rebelled against a man. They had taken their stand against him, the holy God. Bad decision. Horrible decision, because the Lord was going to send an unmistakable message.

After the people had moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, Moses then explained what the Lord was going to do, in verse 28, *"Then Moses said, 'This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt.'*" Notice a couple of things. First, Moses was very specific about what would happen. Not only would these men die, which would have been a fairly significant prediction, the earth would open up and swallow them. This wasn't going to be a coincidence. It would clearly identify these men as in the wrong in what they had done. The second thing

to note is the comment at the close of verse 30: *"these men have treated the Lord with contempt."* Moses' concern was not really with his own honor and position in the eyes of the people. His concern was with the Lord's honor. These men had treated the Lord with contempt.

The Lord wasted no time in demonstrating the arrogance of these men. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all their possessions. Verse 33 offers this summary: *"They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community."* It wasn't just Korah, Dathan, and Abiram affected by this. Fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men that were offering incense. Suffice it to say: The Lord has no time for those who dare to look down their noses at him. His punishment is swift and severe. Those who will not humble themselves before him will be destroyed.

Read this account and you almost can't help but ask, "What in the world were they thinking?" "Duh! You do not stand up against God; you don't engage him in battle, unless, that is, you happen to have the IQ of a houseplant. I've done plenty of stupid things in my life, but I would never arrogantly stand up against God." With such a statement or such an attitude, we actually demonstrate that which we condemn: arrogance. There is nothing that a human being has done that you couldn't do, too. Think of the worst crimes against humanity that you could imagine. Is it child abuse, rape, murder, fraud, dealing drugs? You could fall into those same sins and commit those same atrocities. You have the same sinful nature that everyone else has. You didn't get a better model than they when you were born. When next you hear a report of some terrible sin, remember that it reflects on you, revealing to you exactly what you're capable of doing. Isn't that what St. Paul was getting at in the second lesson, from 1 Corinthians 10? He points to the sins of the people of Israel and says, "You think that you could never do such things? Think again! If the Israelites, who had so many advantages, could fall into those sins, so could you. So, get rid of any illusions of your greatness and your immunity to temptation. If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall."

We too often think, because the world around us trains us to do so, that so long as you obey the law and try to be helpful to others, you are a good person. And not just in the eyes of the world, but of God, too, because he certainly couldn't have different standards than we. Do enough good and hear enough people sing your praises and soon you will find yourself thinking, "I'm a good person. God

knows that. He knows my heart, so it's all good between God and me." Think of the nicest, most self-sacrificing thing you have ever done. Now look at it objectively. Look at it from the perspective of what God says in his word. He says, in Isaiah 64, "*All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.*" They're sin. Even our best works are sin. How could we even think to call ourselves good when all we do is sin?

This arrogance with which we are born continues to show itself day after day. That arrogance invites destruction, just like what happened to Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. You and I need to come before God, not standing tall and proud, thankful for who we are, what we have done, and the great things we can do in the future, but rather falling flat on our faces, ashamed of what we are and of what we have done. We can only throw ourselves on his mercy, for there is nothing we can give in exchange. That's our only hope – humbling ourselves before the Lord, for he delights to show mercy.

Because he delights to show mercy, God sent his own Son into the world. God didn't have to rescue sinners from the punishment their sins deserved. He did so because he wanted to. Jesus humbled himself before the Father, placing his will under the Father's and doing everything the Father wanted, in order to be our perfect substitute. Every last bit of our sinful pride has been forgiven in the precious blood of Christ; our very sinfulness has been covered with the righteousness of our Savior. God has declared you innocent, and God doesn't lie. Humble yourself before the Lord and he will lift you up with his word of forgiveness and his declaration of righteousness.

You've probably heard it said, at one time or another, that the Old Testament God is much stricter and more judgmental than the God of the New Testament. People who make such a claim point to accounts such as this one to back up their claim. It's simply not true. The reality is that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are one and the same. God does not change. He is always the same. He is always the God of absolute holiness, who hates sin and hates sinners. He is always the God of unconditional love, who loves sinners by a free choice of his will. We see both of those demonstrated in this account. Yes, he devoured Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. But, still his love shines through.

The first evidence of that is found elsewhere in Scripture. Read, for example, the heading of Psalm 42, which announces that it is a song of the Sons of Korah. Evidently, some of the family of Korah did not join in the rebellion. The Lord preserved that family

line and graciously used them to compose psalms that would nurture the people of God for ages.

A second evidence of the love of God is what he did for the people who remained. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were going to lead the people astray. If they had had their way, they would have destroyed the public ministry that the Lord had instituted. They would have robbed the people of the truth of God's Word and thus condemned people to eternal death. When the Lord acts in judgment, he always does it in the interest of his mercy, to rescue others.

Hasn't the Lord done the same for us? While false teachers are reproducing like rabbits, the Lord has preserved his truth. He continues to provide public ministers of the gospel to teach us the way to life and to warn us against the lies of the devil. That we may take that for granted and just assume that there will always be people who teach the truth of Scripture doesn't make it any less amazing. How great is the Lord's love to cause his gospel to sound forth even to us and our children!

Yet another evidence of the love of God shining through is the object lesson he provided for his people. The Lord directed Moses to have Eleazer gather together the censers out of the smoldering remains and put them to good use. He describes that in verse 38: "*Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the Lord and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites.*" The altar, as with everything else that the Lord commanded in what we call the ceremonial law, was a foreshadowing of the Lord's Anointed. That altar, covered with the bronze of the censers, pictured the precious sacrifice that Jesus would offer on Calvary's cross for the sins of the world. That bronze-covered altar would also remind the people how they were to live. They were to place themselves under the Lord, believe what he says, and do what he commands.

The Lord does not tell you to humble yourself before him because he likes to feel high and mighty. He is high and mighty. No one compares to him. He tells you to humble yourself before him for your benefit. He knows what will happen if you get caught up in yourself and feel no need for him. You'll die forever. He loves you too much to let you think that way. And so he calls you to a life of repentance.

The world in which we live does not place a high value on humility. The world says, "You have to believe in yourself." Humility, the argument goes, stands in the way of that. Yet here stands the Lord's clear direction: Humble yourself before him. Humble yourself, knowing the total corruption of your nature

and recognizing not only the sin that you have committed, but the sins you could commit because of your sinfulness. Humble yourself before the Lord, knowing that the Lord does not leave the penitent in

despair, but always comes with the word of pardon and peace. Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will lift you up.