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Philippians 2:3–4, ESV

³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

James 4:6b, ESV

⁶Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Humility and availability.

During my decades as a professor, I encountered many students who were in need. I tried to do my best as a professor to be friendly and open, to show grace and concern, to treat students as people whom I was blessed to teach. Twice, I had students who did not attend class all semester and then came to me at the end of finals week, looking for an Incomplete; in both cases, these students proved to be in great personal need. I told you about one of them once, in a sermon; that student had witnessed his father killing his mother. I wasn't very kind to that student initially, and then after he told me his story, I deeply regretted being angry with him before listening to him. The second time a student came to me looking for an Incomplete without having done any work, I had learned my lesson, so I did my best to listen with compassion, and I tried to

get him to talk to me. I noticed right away that he had an odd demeanor. He did not look directly at me. He spoke softly, and at times, spoke over me, but he did it without raising his voice, as if he was not aware I was talking, not as if he just didn't want to listen to me. He kept saying that he was hoping to get an Incomplete and he never addressed the fact that he hadn't come to class at all. The truth is that I failed at properly communicating with him. He seemed frightened. I tried to make him comfortable with me, saying that I just needed to know what was going on, why he hadn't been to class. I asked him if he was facing any problems in his life. I did my best to be calming, even fatherly. In the end, without me seeming to have had any impact on him, he left. On impulse, as he stood up to leave, I asked him for permission to talk to his parents. College professors do not normally interact with parents. This was a bizarre request, but I didn't know what else to do. Softly, he said, "Yes, sure," and he nodded. At my request, he wrote his parents' phone number on my whiteboard. He left.

When I got his mother on the phone and identified myself as one of her son's professors, she thanked me for calling. There was an intense emotion in her voice, a mix of worry and fear. She asked me what was wrong with her son. Was he okay? I said he was fine, then I told her what was going on. She then told me that she had been very afraid about him going away to college, that when he was

in school it was easy for her to interact with his teachers, but that she now felt disconnected and helpless. She said that her son had Asperger's. That did not shock me. I taught computer science, and several times, I had had students whom I thought could be somewhere on the autism spectrum. I once had an extraordinarily gifted student from China in my class who had Asperger's – and I have also talked about him in one of my sermons. This mother told me that she knew that her son was having trouble. He wasn't calling them regularly and didn't want to talk when they called him. He was a sophomore and had made it through his freshman year with very good grades but had needed a lot of help from the office on campus that serves students with disabilities. They had apparently been extremely kind and helpful. Now, though, he had stopped going to his appointments at the disability office. I told her that I was more than happy to give her son an Incomplete and work with him over the Christmas break to make up his work, and I asked her if there was anything else I could do.

This student was taking a class in 3D modeling and animation from me, and the main assignment for the semester was to create an animated short. It was creative, unconventional material and called for a lot of in-class interaction with me. He was very smart, she told me. He learned what he could from the lectures and the book, but almost never asked for any help from an instructor, teaching

assistant, or another student. He was taking a full load of classes; she was fairly certain that it was only mine that he was failing. I told her that I was more than happy to spend a lot of time with him, and that I would send him email asking him to come back to my office. I told her that classes were over for the semester, so I would need him to respond to my email. She promised me that he would. Before I could even get around to sending him email, she called me back an hour or so later. She told me that she had called her son, and that he had said that I was very gentle with him. That was the word she used: gentle. She thanked me and said that this would make him trust me. She said that he had probably been too intimidated to talk to me in class, but now, she was sure he would.

I saw this student through his project, and he did a very good job. What's true is that the gentleness that she referred to flowed from humility. Humility is a sort of open door to a lot of other important Christian personality traits. Much flows from humility. Let's look at our first passage for today. It's from Paul's letter to the Christians at Philippi. Philippians is a letter written by Paul the evangelist to a church he had founded. According to the Book of Acts, he did this on his second missionary journey, around the year 50. Philippi was a wealthy city in Macedonia dating back to the middle of the fourth century B.C. Philippi was surrounded by farms and mines filled with precious metals. The population was

mixed: Romans, Greeks, and Jews, and correspondingly, many different religions were practiced there, with a tiny Christian church. Since the letter is choppy, some scholars believe that it is a blend of two or three separate letters written by Paul. The purpose of the letter was to give the Christians in the city advice on how to deal with growing persecution, and how to manage dissent among the people in the congregation.

Our passage is brief and very clear:

³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

In the chapter where our quote comes from, Paul is giving the people of the church in Philippi advice on how to hold their congregation together, how to be useful and kind to each other. In verses 3 and 4, he focuses on humility and on being available to help each other.

Our second passage is a single verse from James, and in fact, only part of that verse:

⁶But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

James, one of the shorter books of the Bible, is a letter written by someone who identifies himself simply as James. It is often called a book of Wisdom, which is a

term that normally refers to a handful of books from the Old Testament, namely Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. James isn't really a letter; it's a polished essay written in the form of a letter. The letter doesn't precisely identify who this James is. But it is widely believed to be the brother of Jesus. He was a leader of the Jerusalem church, which was made up of Jewish converts. As recorded in Acts 15, James was active in the Jerusalem Council, which affirmed the decision to bring the faith to Gentiles, or non-Jews. The author wrote the letter to address the spiritual needs of Jewish Christians living in the area immediately around him. The people there lived a very hard life. The Roman Empire had taken land from farmers, turning them into poorly paid farm hands. Many were driven off the land and ended up working in towns as marketplace day-laborers. There was an extreme separation of wealth, with what we might call the traditional middle class being driven in large part into poverty.

In our passage, James is giving advice on how to live according to the teachings of Jesus and how to best emulate the life of the Messiah. He wants them to know that the greatest gift in life is the grace of God. It is not a worldly thing, but it is incredibly valuable. He tells them how to earn it:

⁶Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

You do not know if the next person you meet will be someone who needs help. So, it's critical that you greet everyone you encounter as if you might be serving them. You do not walk through a human zoo, filled with interesting people you get to stare at and study. You live in that zoo. You are one of those animals. Let people stare at you. Let them notice you. Make yourself available for viewing. It's good to find a way to be out in the world connecting with people. That's where doing volunteer work can come in handy. Belonging to a church is a good way to encounter people in a trusting environment where you might be able to easily connect. Make yourself available to your friends, neighbors, relatives. Become that person who is always ready to help someone move or take care of their dog or drive them to a medical appointment. Build a world of openness and trust around you. But most of all - be humble! Be modest. Be available as that person to whom someone can always talk.

Living a Christian life is easy. It can be very calming and rewarding. Unlike evangelical churches, major denominational Christian churches are in very rapid decline. Younger people do not want to hear the message of humility and service, of being kind and helpful. Or at least that's how things have been over the last twenty years. I suspect, though, that there will be a resurgence of faith that truly reflects the way Jesus Christ lived. The churches that have been thriving in recent

decades tend to be feel good churches, where the pastor preaches that God will reward the faithful with worldly wealth and success. People are not held to the standards presented in the Gospels, the letters of Paul, the pastoral letters, and other books of the New Testament. It's a shallow message and I believe that there is an emerging generation of young people who do not want to live by those false values. I believe they are open to the message of the genuine Jesus. There was a huge upswing in church membership following the Vietnam war, when people realized that Americans had lost their spiritual roots. It might be that the Covid-19 pandemic will serve as a catalyst for renewal. The message that Jesus brought, of being empathetic and caring, of being humble and available to support others, this is a message that people will respond to. We will always return to walking in the true footsteps of Jesus – because this is how we were meant to live. We feel rooted, purposeful, and calm when we connect with the Holy Spirit living within us and accept God's grace. Please pray briefly with me.

God, help us live with two characteristics that have been missing from our society for so long: humility and availability. Let us reach out to those around us and bring others back to God. Let us rebuild the true Christian church in America. Guide us as we strive to be the roots of a new revival in America and in the world. Amen.