

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Sermon: I'm praying humble

During the depression when amusements had to be largely home-made, it was not uncommon for people to entertain themselves by gathering together in the evening to sing. Down in Kinston, North Carolina, four men who had lost their farms but taken up jobs like truck driving, carpentry, and tobacco factory work, formed a small group that made a name singing acapella Gospel music. They were William Brown (lead tenor), Julius Davis (tenor), Louis "Panella" Davis (baritone) and Sam Bryant (bass). A enterprising local fellow named Willie Mitchell told them he could get them on a record and he did - under the name Mitchell's Christian Singers.

On August 10, 1937 they went to New York City and recorded "I'm Praying Humble" which was released on Columbia records. Within a year Bob Crosby - that was Bing Crosby's brother - released another version of the song performed by a big band with a swinging trumpet solo. No credit was given to Mitchell's Christian Singers, and probably never would have been if it wasn't for legendary record producer and concert promoter John Hammond, a man whose helped artists as diverse as Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen. Hammond booked the Mitchell's Christian Singers into Carnegie Hall in December of 1938 and 1939 for two concerts he called "From Spirituals to Swing." The Four farmers got their due.

It's a haunting song, and I'd like to play a little bit of it for you.

I have to admit that apart from the line, "Lord, I'm praying humble;" I can't understand a word they're saying! But after I heard it the first time, that "I'm praying humble" just kept echoing in my head and I thought of it all these years later when I read the Gospel lesson for today: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Lord, I'm praying humble.

The scripture put a high premium on humility. Some of the most quoted verses either recommend it or direct our attention to it. From the prophet Micah: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

And Jesus speaks to every generation of believers when he says: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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."

In our confirmation class today we are considering the topic of prayer. One question I've asked the students in the past was, is there a wrong way to pray? What do you think, is there a wrong way to pray?

I'd like to think there isn't but Jesus tells a very pointed parable about a Pharisee who is not praying humble and holds him up as an example of the wrong way to pray:

Luke 18:10-14 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Lord, I'm praying humble.

Do we give much consideration to the proper attitude to bring to worship and prayer? What does it mean to be praying humble?

The latest Newsweek magazine has an article entitled, Click in Remembrance of Me - it's about how the world wide web and social networks are reshaping community and, in some instance, the celebration of communion. The question, one person quoted in the article said, is "how we can provide authentic worship experience through the Web."

I'm always a little troubled when I hear the phrase "worship experience." I don't want to lose sight of worship as a verb - as something we do, something we do for God. If we are worried about what kind of experience it is for us, what makes it feel authentic to us, then aren't we worshipping ourselves?

Going by what the bible says, what makes worship authentic for God is praying humble. It wouldn't matter if you were praying humble alone in the woods, in the center of Grand Central Station at rush hour, at the Vatican with the Pope and a choir of ten thousand, on the web, on the beach, or on the roof top. Certain things we do, like communion in church, serve a specific function in our community and our world. But that doesn't exclude other ways of worship. What matters is not the external circumstances but the internal state of being, which can be struggling, which can be conflicted, which can be far from perfect - but which is praying humble.

M: I will bless the Lord at all times; God's praise shall continually be in my mouth.

P: My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.

M: O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt God's name together.

P: I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

M: This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.

P: O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.