

Doctrine & Covenants Lesson 7 Notes: Humility vs Pride

*Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord,
and he shall lift you up.*

James 4:10

*For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy;
I dwell in the high and holy place,
with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit.*

Isaiah 57:15

GOSPEL PARADOXES

You cannot think about the scriptural admonition to humble yourself and its mirror image, to avoid pride, without beginning down the road of the great gospel paradoxes. Christ said, “For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” (Luke 14:11) Think of where this all leads. The way up is down. The way to find yourself is to lose yourself. The way to be full is to empty yourself. The way to live is to die. The way to be great is to be nothing. If you try to free yourself of God’s rules and authority, you end up in bondage. By becoming a servant of Christ, you are made free indeed. And on and on it goes. All the great truths of the gospel are counter-intuitive.

Christianity seems to be a system of paradoxes. A paradox is, after all, a statement that seems to be false, or at least, self-contradictory, yet is true. It points the way to truth that is deeper than the apparent truths of surface level observations, or in the “truth” that the world promotes. If we can’t get down to the deeper, truer truths, we will have lost the very purpose of mortality. For mortality is a school designed to teach us eternal truth. But it is also a test. And so it is a place where temptations and deceit compete for our attention with God’s truth.

In this earthly system that we live in—called variously in the word of God, Babylon, the Great Whore¹, the Great and Abominable Church or the Great and Spacious Building—there is a set of rules to the game. Blessed are the rich, for they shall get anything they want. Blessed are the popular for they shall be happy. Blessed are the talented for they will get recognition and be able to open any door. Blessed are the lucky, for fate has smiled on them. Blessed are the beautiful, for they will be loved. Blessed are the well-born, for they shall have advantages. You can add theorem upon sub-theorem to this postulation of the Law of the World. But you can see quite clearly that only one way can be true. You can’t choose to believe both the truth of the world and the truth of the gospel. (Though people try.)

MAN’S FALL

The gospel view doesn’t take issue with the world that mankind needs lifting. For this earth began with a fall. Adam and Eve walked and talked with God in a gorgeous garden, picking fruit off trees and naming animals. Life was lovely. But Adam and Eve had a flaw that would prove the undoing of paradise. They were innocent, inexperienced, unsuspecting and naïve. That is not a bad thing if you are a child and have adults looking out for you—it is to be expected. It was a bad thing for them, however, because they had a powerful enemy bent on their destruction. But since they were naïve and innocent, they didn’t know that. It was the perfect set-up for Lucifer’s attack. Satan knew they wouldn’t understand all the implications of what he tempted them to do. And he was right. They didn’t. He tricked them. The Book of Mormon says he “did beguile our first parents.” (Mosiah 16:3) He pulled the wool over their eyes. Or at least, over Eve’s eyes. Adam, when he understood that Eve had eaten and would “fall” or be cast out of the garden that was their home, quickly realized what a bite of the delicious fruit would do to him. He ate anyway, deciding that what he wanted most was to stay with

¹ Why is the world a “whore”? Because love of the world is an illegitimate love. It is giving that love that should be reserved for God, to a painted lady, a false woman who can only pretend to satisfy, but leaves her lovers diseased and weak. Perfect imagery.

Eve; and so he jumped over the edge of the world after her.

After their expulsion from Eden, Adam and Eve began to beget and populate the fallen earth (which we are told, itself fell, from its Celestial ranking down to a Telesstial cosmic neighborhood—a real comedown!). Fallen man now had a serious problem, which was how to get *back up*. God is *up* there. He is high. He is above men. Heaven is always *up*, no matter which part of the planet we are standing on. That’s because “up” in this context means higher spiritually, not necessarily a direction measured from the spot we’re on. In fact, one Hebrew word for God is Ely-ohn, from the word for elevation. It means the Supreme, the Most High. The King James scholars translated this word *Highest* in such verses as Psalm 18:13, “The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Highest gave his voice.” Highest is another name for God.

God never intended that man should be left here on this fallen earth without hope. From the beginning Adam taught his posterity that there was a way back up to God. It would be a climb. And though it would include many hard things, these would turn out to be valuable learning experiences², and we would be glad³, in the end, for this opportunity. The way back, in fact, would be a *person*—Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind. As he said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.” (John 14:6)

THE REDEMPTION

Since all of mankind partook of Adam’s fall, receiving as a result a nature that would pull him down as surely as tides or gravity pull, then one man could reverse the curse. One man could undo what one man had done. Or as Paul put it, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:22) But how could any man get out from under this universal downward moral gravity? How could one man evade the pull of being carnal, sensual and devilish? He could do it by partaking of a nature that was not subject to this downward pull. By having in his nature the genetic contribution of God himself. God, another name for whom is Elohim (which means in Hebrew *almighty*), was not subject to this downward pull, and by passing on his nature to his son, neither would his son be subject to this downward force. Because of his mortal nature, inherited through the genetic contribution of his mother, Mary, Christ could feel temptation: hunger, fatigue and all the other pulls of the fleshly nature, but because he also partook of God’s nature, he did not respond to these things like we do. He had perfect control over not only his own physical body, but also over the fallen physical world he inhabited. That was why he could walk on water and multiply bread a thousand fold and cure all manner of illness. That was also why he could eventually overcome death, bringing his dead body back to life after submitting to death on the cross. He had the power of God in the body of a man.

So how does that remedy our fallen situation? Here we are, down here on a demoted planet, with a rather grim outlook for improving the situation on our own. The world we live in has not been a Garden of Eden for a long time. Wars, tyranny, sickness, poverty and death are the common lot of man. As Paul poetically put it, “We see through a glass darkly.” The fact that man can love and form relationships, gives him some good things to find meaning in. But life is also pain, and man asks “Why?” The natural world itself, in its order and complexity, has led mankind to ask the question, “Who made all of this? And to what purpose?”

The world answers this question one way. While lip service may be paid to virtue, the main message is to “get ahead.” Life is a bell shaped curve and everybody should do all they can to claw their way to the top of it. If you have to step on others to get there, so be it; that’s what science gives its blessing to by calling “survival of the fittest.” Korihor put it succinctly: “Every man fares in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospers according to his genius, and... every man conquers according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime.”

But there is another, vastly different answer to man’s fallen nature. God sent angels to reveal it to us from the beginning. In his Divine purpose he threw down a rope for us to grab hold of. If man (meaning of course, men *and* women) would *covenant* or promise to obey, He would continue to reveal layer upon layer of eternal truth (*real* truth) and relate to men and women through a covenant relationship with him. The covenant was all-important, because it was the covenant that would connect us to the Savior, allowing us to ride his coat-tails up and out of this brief stay at the universe’s boarding School of Hard Knocks.

² “Life is as bad as it has to be.” E.A. Robinson, American poet. An oxymoron, whose truth most Mormons will recognize.

³ “And Eve ... was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.” Moses 5:11

“Wherefore, I will that all men shall repent, for all are under sin... Wherefore I have sent unto you mine everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning. And that which I have promised I have so fulfilled, and the nations of the earth shall bow to it; and, if not of themselves, they shall come down, for that which is now exalted of itself shall be laid low of power.” (D&C 49:10) Here we have the problem—sin—and the solution—the covenant. The covenant begins with baptism, a covenant made with Jesus Christ, which allows those who make it to tap into the saving power of the atonement. To “bow” to the covenant is to humble oneself before it and admit that there is no other solution. No money, no military might, no political power, no brilliant intelligence or great learning, no high birth, no beauty, no physical prowess or talent of any kind, no goodness or merit of one’s own, nothing, in fact, that man can bring to the equation, can solve his predicament. We must bow to the covenant and “rely wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save.” (2 Nephi 31:19) “Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah.” (2 Nephi 2:8) Not meaning to belabor the point, but it is necessary to be perfectly clear. The way to grab hold of this life preserver is by covenant. It is not enough to believe that Jesus came and did what the scriptures say he did. The devils also believe and tremble.

THE NECESSITY OF A HUMBLE HEART

An integral part of the experience of salvation is to have the attitude we call humility. The image of bowing down to something begins to address this concept. The only way *up* according to gospel truth, is *down*. So then, coming down or humbling yourself, is very, very foundational to the whole gospel scheme of ultimately being lifted back up. Christ said He was “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” He said also to the Nephites, “what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am.” (3 Nephi 27:27) We would expect, then, that Christ also walked this way. He must have shown us humility in his own earthly existence. And so he did. He said of himself, “I am meek and lowly in heart.” (Matt.11:29) Paul said of him to the Philippians, “And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” The Book of Mormon puts it a different way: “The Lord God showeth us our weakness that we may know that it is by his grace, and his great condescensions unto the children of men, that we have power to do these things.” Both mean the same thing. To humble oneself is to condescend, to come down.

In what ways did Christ *come down*? To begin with he left his exalted station in heaven to come to earth. He was Jehovah, the Lord God of the Old Testament who thundered his word from Sinai and who created this earth. He holds it up in his almighty hand as the Psalms remind us. Who is greater than God? No one. We live in a world that loves its superheroes. But Jesus was different from all of them. He was not a being who *had* power. He *was* Power.

Yet he came to earth—born in a stable—to parents who had no earthly position of significance or wealth. It is said he came under a cloud of the suspicion of illegitimacy, having been born too soon after Mary’s marriage to Joseph for his mother to be granted respectability by her peers. He sought no honor or recognition from the power structure of his day. He had no formal education. He held no office. He spent time with the lowest classes in his society, tax collectors, the poor, women, including some of less than sterling reputation, the sick, even lepers. He was widely misunderstood, persecuted, unjustly accused by false witnesses and then tried, scourged, imprisoned, and sentenced by craven religious leaders who pressured a cowardly politician to do their bidding. He let them do this, when he had only to lift one little finger to blow them to smithereens.

But his power was always under complete control. He never used it in any way for selfish purposes, to gain glory or honor. Never to amaze the crowd. Never for applause. He acted like an ordinary man when it came to the routine of daily life. He got dirty and tired and thirsty and hungry. He walked the dusty roads like other poor men. He had no home. He desired no adulation. He always referred to himself as the Son of Man, emphasizing his identification with us in our humanity.

But perhaps most startling of all is the way he refused any credit or honor for the remarkable things that he did. For that he did mighty miracles, everyone, including his enemies, freely acknowledged. He healed all manner of diseases, and he restored the blind, the deaf and dumb. He cast out devils. He raised the dead. He walked on water and calmed the storm. He fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes. When told by his disciples that they owed taxes, he plucked a coin from the mouth of a dead fish. There was nothing it seemed, that he could not do. Yet he called these things “the works of my Father,” as if he had done nothing himself. He repeat-

edly spoke as if he was only taking orders, speaking always of the Father who “sent him.” “I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.” (John 5:30)

He knew that the “will of the Father” included death on the cross, a brutal type of execution that Rome reserved for those it wished to humiliate. But the will of the Father included something much worse than a barbarous death. D&C 88:6 says of him that, “He...ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth.” Perhaps we don’t want to dwell too much on what it might mean to “descend below all things” but we can agree that whatever the worse possible thing is that anyone has ever suffered, he suffered infinitely more. To go below “all things” is comprehensive, complete in scope. There can be nothing lower than what Christ experienced. Mormons know that this descent was concentrated in the experience of the Garden of Gethsemane. There in some incomprehensible way all human suffering was poured into him, giving him the combined experience of all our pain, grief, fear and loss. No weight could have been heavier. No horror more terrible. No sorrow more deep. Truly could he say, “The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?” (D&C 122:8)

Remarkably, when he describes his Gethsemane suffering in D&C Section 19:19, he shows us the complete reach of his humility. If there was ever anything that he could take credit for, which we might well think he *should* take credit for, this was it. He was willing to suffer all things for us, because he loved us. Surely he would admit that this was courageous and loving and deserves our thanks. But he does not say so. Listen: “Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—Nevertheless, *glory be to the Father*, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.” He humbly admits to having “shrunk” from the task—who would not—and then describes its triumphant conclusion by saying, “Glory be to the Father,” I finished the job. Though he frankly states the truth, that he is God, he still gives the credit to his Father.

There are other remarkable scenes from Christ’s life of humility. To temper the rivalry that bubbled up among his apostles he reminded them that their business was not to seek to be served, but to serve. He demonstrated this by washing their feet, the task of the lowliest servant. “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet.” (John 13:14) He showed them how to love and serve from a place of self-forgetfulness and humility.

With Christ as our model, we are supposed to be living out our gratitude for his gift of salvation through our own humble service to “the least of these, our brethren” because we are told that when we do, we are doing it “unto him.” This is the way. But Christ also says, “Few there be that find it.” Why is that? Because, to turn a phrase just slightly, man is born to pride as the sparks fly upward. Probably our first really raw emotions are those of sibling rivalry. We don’t mind pulling that brother or sister off so we can climb on mother’s lap. Human nature being what it is, we want to be king of the hill, to get praise and recognition, to be told we are great. In fact, if people seem not to act in this way, we are suspicious that they do not have the proper self esteem.⁴

THE PRIDE CYCLE

When considering our own spiritual obligation to be humble or to “humble ourselves,” we are forced to come to grips with the fact that this is not something we can leave to chance. It is something we must do. The scriptures give us directions. The Book of Mormon particularly seems to be a cautionary tale of how to avoid the pitfalls of pride. We speak of the pride-cycle in the Book of Mormon, referring to the seemingly fatal consequences of wealth and ease upon the hearts of men and women who are blessed with earthly wealth and advantages. Of the men and women who become “lifted up” or “puffed up” by these things (favorite phrases of the Book of Mormon) Christ himself laments, “they are led away captive by [Satan] even as was the son of perdition; for they will sell me for silver and for gold.” (3 Nephi 27:32) No greater threat to our spiritual welfare exists than the love of money. The bible calls it the root of all evil. (1 Timothy 6:10) Money is the great goal of the world. It is the currency by which you can gain anything your heart desires. Love, beauty, fame, honor, ease,

⁴ Self esteem, that hallmark of education curriculum, parenting books and psychology texts throughout the 80s and 90’s has fallen somewhat out of favor these days as studies have shown that bullies and gang members score extremely high in measures of self esteem. Perhaps human beings need something more than to think well of themselves.

health—all can seemingly be bought with money. At least that is Satan’s sales pitch, though we see that the pride cycle is indeed a cycle, and it comes full circle in the inevitable fall at the end, for unlike Jesus Christ, Satan is a master who will “not support his children at the last day.” (Alma 30:60)

What light does the Doctrine and Covenants have to shed on the problem of pride and the spiritual exercise of humility? Much indeed. Often its teachings go hand in hand with God’s call to build Zion, for that enterprise would necessarily act as a preventative to pride. If a person sees themselves and their efforts as something to offer up to the cause of building Zion and the kingdom of God, they will not, almost by definition, be seeking to build their own reputation or kingdom. The two are incompatible.

That the two purposes ended up clashing, with the building of Zion suffering as a result, should not surprise us. It is not easy to be humble! The Lord said this to the members of the church in Kirtland: “Behold, I, the Lord, am not well pleased with many who are in the church at Kirtland; For they do not forsake their sins, and their wicked ways, the pride of their hearts, and their covetousness, and all their detestable things, and observe the words of wisdom and eternal life which I have given unto them. Verily I say unto you, that I, the Lord, will chasten them and will do whatsoever I list, if they do not repent and observe all things whatsoever I have said unto them.” (98:19-21)

Various individuals also were warned. Oliver Cowdery (23:1) and Emma Smith (25:14) were told to “beware of pride.” A man named James Covill was told: “Thou hast seen great sorrow, for thou hast rejected me many times because of pride and the cares of the world.” (39:9) Ezra Thayre was warned to “repent of his pride, and of his selfishness,” two traits that seem to be running mates. (56:8) Even Joseph Smith and his brethren in the first presidency were told, “be admonished in all your high-mindedness and pride, for it bringeth a snare upon your souls.” (90:17) The whole church received this caution: “And if ye seek the riches which it is the will of the Father to give unto you, ye shall be the richest of all people, for ye shall have the riches of eternity; and it must needs be that the riches of the earth are mine to give; but beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old.” (38:39)

Spiritual growth is not always comfortable. The fall of man meant leaving the garden after all. The advice we receive sounds harsh. “Strip yourselves from jealousies and fears, and humble yourselves before me, for ye are not sufficiently humble.” (D&C 67:10) Alma turns it into a question, “Behold, are ye stripped of pride? Behold, I say unto you, if ye are not ye are not prepared to meet God.” (Alma 5:28)

How are we to do this? It is a daunting task to voluntarily step down from the heights where our pride tells us we deserve to stand, and take a place among the meek and lowly. The answer is that God will help us, as he helps us do all those impossible things he requires of us, through his grace, “according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man.” (Ephesians 3:16) That is our only hope and that is also why the Savior so forcefully confronted his disciples with this stark truth: “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

PRAYER IS THE KEY

Again, how will we accomplish this? We know we need help and that we cannot humble ourselves without the enabling power of Christ through his Spirit, but still we ask, “How?” The answer of the word of God seems to be prayer. It is in prayer that we humble ourselves before God and repent of our sins. We have a case study in the Doctrine and Covenants’ account of Martin Harris wanting to be one of the three witnesses of the Golden plates. The Lord said to him, “Behold, I say unto him, he exalts himself and does not humble himself sufficiently before me; but if he will bow down before me, and humble himself in mighty prayer and faith, in the sincerity of his heart, then will I grant unto him a view of the things which he desires to see... And now, except he humble himself and acknowledge unto me the things that he has done which are wrong, and covenant with me that he will keep my commandments, and exercise faith in me, behold, I say unto him, he shall have no such views, for I will grant unto him no views of the things of which I have spoken.” (D&C 5:24,28)

This could serve as a template for our own lives. In the first place, the very act of prayer brings us to our knees, with head bowed and arms clasped, eyes closed, symbolically witnessing to our powerlessness before the Almighty to whom we bring our petition. In the very act of prayer, the stage is set for us to recognize our dependence on God. The first order of business is then to “acknowledge unto [him] the things [we] have done which are wrong.” It was this very thing that was the difference between the prayer of the Publican and the

Pharisee in Christ's day. The Pharisee did not acknowledge any wrongdoing, but rather thanked God for his righteousness. "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men..." Then his prayer became a laundry list of things he expected brownie points for: tithing, fasting, etc. The publican, on the other hand, "would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus pointed out the difference between the two men, and said the words that bring us back to the paradox we started with: "I tell you, this man [the publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." (Luke 18:14)

The great prophets of the Book of Mormon took a similar approach. King Benjamin said to his people, "I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come, which was spoken by the mouth of the angel. And behold, I say unto you that if ye do this ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of your sins; and ye shall grow in the knowledge of the glory of him that created you, or in the knowledge of that which is just and true." (Mosiah 4:10-11)

Alma admonishes us in a similar strain to "humble ourselves even to the dust, and worship God, in whatsoever place [we] may be in, in spirit and in truth; and that [we] live in thanksgiving daily, for the many mercies and blessings which he doth bestow upon [us]." (Alma 34:38)

COME UNTO ME

The words of the Doctrine and Covenants are similarly straightforward: "And inasmuch as ye are humble and faithful and call upon my name, behold, I will give you the victory." (104:82) The Lord promises he "will gather his people even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, even as many as will hearken to my voice and humble themselves before me, and call upon me in mighty prayer." Again and again, we see humility hand in hand with prayer. It seems they cannot be separated.

"Wherefore, I command you again to repent, lest I humble you with my almighty power; and that you confess your sins, lest you suffer these punishments of which I have spoken, of which in the smallest, yea, even in the least degree you have tasted at the time I withdrew my Spirit. 23 Learn of me, and listen to my words; walk in the meekness of my Spirit, and you shall have peace in me. 28 And again, I command thee that thou shalt pray vocally as well as in thy heart; yea, before the world as well as in secret, in public as well as in private. 38 Pray always, and I will pour out my Spirit upon you, and great shall be your blessing—yea, even more than if you should obtain treasures of earth and corruptibleness to the extent thereof. 39 Behold, canst thou read this without rejoicing and lifting up thy heart for gladness? 40 Or canst thou run about longer as a blind guide? 41 Or canst thou be humble and meek, and conduct thyself wisely before me? Yea, come unto me thy Savior. Amen." (Doctrine & Covenants 19:20,23,28,38-41)