

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Today, we prayed to the “Lord of grace and mercy” that we might be taught by the Spirit “to follow [Jesus’] example ... in true humility, that we may ... with pure hearts and minds avoid ungodly pride.”

As one comes to trust in Jesus, Christians are led to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart*” and to “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (Matt. 22:37, 39). As one comes to trust in Jesus, Christians are called to stop their inward, self-centered focus and turn it outward toward others. That’s hard ... thus, our prayer.

How different is this view from the world today with some of its philosophies. I listened to a podcast this last week where a person was talking about Ayn Rand’s objectivist philosophy popular with some conservative Christian politicians — I’ve never read her, so I don’t know much more than what I heard. But I found myself saying, “No! No! No!” to much of what this acolyte of Rand was saying. Rand herself described this philosophy as “the concept of man as a heroic being, WITH HIS OWN HAPPINESS AS THE MORAL PURPOSE OF HIS LIFE, with productive achievement as his noblest activity” (from Wikipedia on “Objectivism (Ayn Rand)”). That philosophy is hard to reconcile with what Jesus did, and what Jesus taught.

With eyes that comprehend what Jesus’ cross means for a world full of sinners, we Christians certainly understand what Jesus did as heroic. But what He did is also scandalous to the world and seen not as heroic at all, but as folly. What Solomon writes is surely true: it “*is the glory of God to conceal things.*” This was one of Luther’s great insights, too. “He deserves to be called a theologian ... who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross” (Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 20, *Luther’s Works*, 31:52). And Luther, in explanation, points us to the prophet Isaiah who said of the “*God of Israel, the Savior,*” “*Truly, you are a God who hides himself*” (Isa. 45:15).

Behind the curtain of human flesh, the Son of God in true humility hid His Divine glory from our eyes, though on occasions some saw glimpses of the glory of “*the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). Incarnate in the womb of a virgin and born of this “*humble*” “*servant of the Lord*” (Luke 1:38, 48), this One “*born king of the Jews*” (Matt. 2:2) in true humility did not seek an earthly kingship, although some tried to make Him king (John 6:15). His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36), and letting Himself be exalted onto the throne would not have helped Him with His task of saving the world.

That task would require humility; it would require sacrifice; it would require blood. With blood dripping from His head and hands and feet, hanging from a cross, Jesus breathed His last, and the curtain that hid God from man’s eyes was

torn in two from top to bottom, and the way to God opened back up. So that, with Jesus' blood in hand, we now pass through the curtain of His flesh into the most Holy Place of His Divine presence, confident that we who have humbled ourselves "*under the mighty hand of God*" will be exalted by Him (1 Pet. 5:6), righteous in His sight, our sins are forgiven.

And it wasn't for His own happiness that Jesus endured this humiliation. It was for us, and for our salvation. "*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*" (1 Tim. 1:15).

Moreover, this "true humility" is what Jesus taught that we Christians are to aspire to. St. Paul taught it, too. Let me start with Paul, who wrote: "*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 2:5). Your attitude is to be the same as that of Christ Jesus, and that attitude is one of humility. St. Paul says: Christ "*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*" (Phil. 2:6-8).

Jesus put it this way: "*everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*" And He's not talking about feigning humility for the purpose of being exalted—a human failing, to be sure. We're often trying to hide our real motivations that pridefully look to our own exaltation; but we can't hide that from the Lord who searches the heart and tests the mind (Jer. 17:10).

Certainly, unabashed self-exaltation, Jesus opposes. The one "*who exalts himself will be humbled*" — like the one in the parable who sat down in the place of honor and had to move to the lowest spot. But also pretending to be humble while seeking an exaltation is not what the Lord was teaching. That certainly wasn't Jesus' humility. His was true, but ours often is not. Thus, today we prayed for the Holy Spirit's help to give us that true humility in the likeness of Jesus, for we have God's promise — "*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you*" (James 4:10) — and God's promise is sure. Moreover, we prayed that He would keep far from us ungodly pride, for Scripture warns us: "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*" (James 4:6) — a warning but also a promise.

Jesus, the One who ate with tax collectors and sinners, also instructs us how we are to act: "*When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.*"

I was tested by this very word of God this week. On Wednesday, as I was preparing for the Divine Service that evening, a man called from the narthex: “Hello.” I came out from behind the reredos and answered him, “Hello,” and I went back to meet him. Here was a man; he had a wife. He had gotten out of prison not long ago. He needed help. They needed a place to stay.

I’m pretty sure I did not pass the Lord’s test that evening, though I indeed helped them. I didn’t pass it for at least two reasons: 1) I didn’t have a good attitude about this—mine was more feigning kindness than being kind.

Believe you me, we get many requests at Zion for help. And we have some monies budgeted such for assistance (some, but not much). Of course, I want to be a good steward of the monies allotted. When it comes to food help (and that’s most of the requests), we have a process that culls out those that want to prey on the church. It’s working pretty well. But we get other kinds of requests, too, and I have to evaluate them and decide whether to help or not. So it was with this one. I decided to help out.

But, 2) the man offered to do some work around the church. He could do a lot of things, he said, and he certainly looked strong enough to work. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll get you a room tonight, and if you come back to Zion tomorrow morning, I’ll have some work for you to do; then, I’ll spring for another night.”

Now, I go to LSUS on Thursdays for chapel, so I was going to be at Zion by 9 o’clock. “Come at 9,” I told them even though I had Jesus’ words ringing in my ears: “*you will be blessed because they cannot repay you.*”

Well, Thursday morning came, and I was back at church shortly after 9 o’clock—no couple. 10 o’clock—no couple. 11 o’clock—no couple. 12 o’clock—no couple. “Just what I figured,” I thought to myself. Some of you, who know your pastor, are probably shaking your head, “We try to teach you, Pastor.”

I went to the kitchen to grab something to eat before my afternoon visits. 12:10—Melvia came back to the kitchen: “There’s a couple out here to see you.” They came. I put them to work, and yes, I put them up for another night.

But, like I said, I’m sure I did not pass the Lord’s test. I helped them, but not without some repayment. I helped them, but with many doubts and much skepticism. The Lord humbled me and brought me low. I have repented of my doubts, and I always look to Christ for forgiveness. Still, the Lord has some work to do with me, that “*in humility [I may] count others more significant than [myself], [that I may] look not only to [my] own interests, but also to the interests of others*” (Phil. 2:3-4). This, too, is the Christ-like example of humility, and surely we all, I not least, need a bit of help in living out that example.

Thus we pray: Lord, grant us all “Your Holy Spirit” that, rejoicing in Christ’s humility on our behalf, we may “follow the example of Your Son in true humility, ... [that we may] withstand the temptations of the devil” that want us selfishly to seek only our own happiness, [that we may] “with pure hearts and minds avoid ungodly pride,” and finally at length be honored to dine with You at Your heavenly banquet table; through the same Christ, our Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.