

Christ, our Lenten Example

March 2, 2021

Fr. Jacob Bush

Good morning! This is the season of Lent. It is a season of penitence, certainly, but more than that, it is a season of discipline. We can use whichever word we want to use to describe Lent, either penitence or discipline, neither one fills us with the rosiest of feelings. We're not talking about a party at the beach in nice warm weather, or a Stanley Cup victory for the Sabres. No, what we are talking about is humility and denial of self.

These are two marks of a mature disciple of Jesus Christ. Why? Because a servant is not greater than his master. We are disciples of Christ. He is our master, and we are his servants. Christ demonstrated humility, therefore we ought to be humble. Christ demonstrated self-denial; therefore, we are to deny self also. Christ demonstrated discipline in His earthly life therefore we are to maintain discipline in our lives also.

How did Christ demonstrate these qualities? First, in coming to earth. Paul told the Philippians in chapter 2 verses 5-7 to, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men." Again, Christ displayed this attitude of humility in coming to earth. He left the comfort of heaven. He emptied himself and took on our flesh. He did not have to do that, but it was the only way that we can have eternal life with Him.

But Christ's humility did not stop with merely taking on our flesh. Paul continues in verse 8, "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Christ demonstrated humility by coming in the first place, and then he demonstrated humility and self-denial by dying on the cross.

Remember what Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before He died? He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." (Matthew 26:39). He denied what his own feelings were in order to fulfill the will of God the Father. Self-denial. Christ demonstrated it along with humility, and as his disciples we must have those same qualities.

To become a Christian takes humility. We have to look at ourselves and realize that we have sin and cannot save ourselves. We see this with David in the Old Testament. Remember after he sinned by committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband, Uriah, murdered, and Nathan confronts him, David acknowledges his sin. And then he writes Psalm 51, which begins, "Have mercy upon me, O God, in your great goodness; according to the multitude of your mercies wipe away my offences." David understood that only God could deal with his sin. He needed God. We too have to realize our need for God in the same way. We need a Savior. And we need to understand that the Savior is Jesus Christ. We have to understand that we are not wise enough to run our own lives. We have to realize our need to follow Jesus Christ as Lord. We focus on that more in Lent than in other seasons of the year.

But the humility doesn't end there. The life of the Christian is all about humility and self-denial. This is not just true in the season of Lent, but throughout the year. When Paul wrote to the Philippians there was no such thing as the season of Lent. And yet Paul wrote for them to have the same attitude of humility and self-denial that was in Christ Jesus. Why? For our own benefit? In part, there are benefits for us. But the reason we are to have humility in our lives is because it brings honor to God and sets the example for others. It encourages the faithful in Christ, but it also helps the unbeliever find Christ.

If we say that we are in Christ and yet do not deny self and do not have humility, how can we encourage one another in the Lord? How can we love one another in the Lord if all we do is think about ourselves. Is that the attitude of love? No! That's the attitude of competition. But if we have humility, it emboldens other believers to have the same humble attitude. Plus, nobody wants to be around someone with a haughty attitude. Someone who refuses to listen to anyone else. Someone who thinks they are the only one to have it right. That attitude gets old really fast.

It is much easier to be around someone who isn't all about self. Someone that thinks about other people, and about their needs. That was the attitude of Jesus. He was thinking about us when He took on our flesh. He was thinking about us when He went to the cross. Remember that He offered Himself. Nobody took His life, He laid it down for our benefit.

As a result of Jesus' humility, Paul states, "God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of JESUS EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:9-11).

Jesus set the example for us to follow. In Matthew 23:11-12 we read, "But the greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted." Jesus didn't come to be served, but to serve. Jesus humbled himself and the Father exalted Him. Jesus left all the comfort of heaven to take on our flesh and go to the cross and is now seated at the right hand of the Father.

The first section of Matthew 23 deals with the attitude of the religious leadership. They were out to make a name for themselves. They wanted to be seen as important. They wanted respect and admiration and praise for themselves. They were haughty. Jesus says that we are not to be like that. We are to serve, not be served. If we are humble, we will realize our need for Christ. If we are humble, we will not be all about self. If we are humble, God will exalt us.

Now every Audio Adrenaline fan knows that "we're never gonna be as big as Jesus." Jesus is the name above every name, including our own. This passage clearly states that our aim in this life is not to make a name for ourselves. We are not to seek to elevate ourselves but rather to proclaim the Name of the Lord, to bring Him honor and glory. Our reward for that is eternal life. Heirs of the Kingdom. That is our benefit, along with a good relationship with other believers that can encourage us, and correct us, and spur us on in the faith, and also allow us to encourage them, correct them, and spur them on in the faith. We work together toward the goal of building the Church, expanding the Kingdom of God.

The second thing having humility does is it brings honor and glory to God. When we have the same attitude of Christ people wonder why we are the way that we are. It presents us with the opportunity to share the gospel. Every opportunity we have to do that honors Christ.

And that's the third thing having humility does. It presents us with the opportunity to spread the Kingdom. When we are not about self, we demonstrate the contrast between disciples of Christ and the people of the world. They begin to see that Christ is for them, that He does have their best interest at heart. It is attractive. It can soften their heart so that they can see Jesus more clearly for who He is. They begin to understand the wisdom of following Christ as their Savior and Lord.

To be clear, being humble doesn't mean that we deny that we are good at certain things. If we shoot pool well it isn't humble to deny that we can run the table anytime we want. No, that's not humility, that's lying through our teeth. Jesus never denied that He was who He is. He just didn't draw attention to Himself, but rather gave all the glory to the Father. We can own up to our abilities and still be humble. We just don't go seeking attention for ourselves but give the glory to God in Christ. Humility is all about self-denial. Remember the acronym J.O.Y. Jesus, Others, Yourself last. That is humility. Putting Christ first in our lives because we know that we need Him. And then seeking the good of other people second and ourselves last. Having humility makes sense and leads to bearing fruit and to joy. It shows that we are under Christ's influence.

How does this fit into discipline? It is the starting point of a disciplined life, and it is grown and developed through discipline. And when we talk about disciplines we are not just talking about structure, but also the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and reading the Scriptures, attending Church. The first part of that is straight forward. We have to humble ourselves before coming to faith in Christ. Once we understand who we are and who God is we will seek to have discipline in our lives. But over time our discipline can wane because of our flesh. That's where we need to grow in humility so that we continue on in discipline.

How do we start in this? First by recognizing our own personal sin. We acknowledge our sin and then repent of our sin. That means we turn away from self, self-denial, and turn towards God in Christ, humility. By recognizing our sin, we are acknowledging that we have a problem. By being penitent, we humbly acknowledge that we cannot help ourselves and are therefore in need of the Savior. And we accept what Christ did for us on the cross, and then live as He wants us to live rather than how we want ourselves to live. This is the starting point for every believer. Then we set aside time to pray and read the Scriptures. We spend time praying and fasting. We spend time in Church, worshipping God and growing in the faith, learning how to be more like Christ.

Christ gives us the example of living a disciplined life. Look at how He began His public life. He goes to the Jordan to be baptized by John. John sees the Holy Spirit descending on Christ as a dove and hears the voice of the Father say, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. What is the first thing Jesus does after this?

From Luke 4:1-2, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate

nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry.” Here we see Jesus withdraw by himself into the wilderness where He fasted and prayed and did battle with the devil. On Ash Wednesday Fr. Ward preached about fasting and its importance in our spiritual lives. Fasting is a spiritual discipline, and it requires us to deny ourselves, slow down and wait on the Lord.

Jesus maintained discipline in His life. He kept first things first. This passage is not the only one in which we see the disciplined life of Christ. Mark 1:35 states, “In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there.” Here is another instance of the Lord leading a disciplined life. He made time to pray to the Father in secret. We see another example of this in Mark 6:45-46, when after the feeding of the 5000 Jesus sent the disciples ahead of Him by boat while he dismissed the crowds and went up the mountain to pray. Again, we see this in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus tells the disciples to watch, while he goes off by himself to pray.

Notice too that Jesus was in the wilderness when He fasted. He did not fast in front of people because there was nobody else around when He was there. He went by Himself to pray. Again, He set the example to us that when we fast and when we pray, we ought to do so in secret. He stated that explicitly in the sermon on the mount, but He didn’t just say it, rather He demonstrated it for us.

Jesus understood that His relationship with God the Father was the most important relationship He had, and He made communication with Him a priority. He was then able to say the things He heard the Father say and do what He saw the Father doing because His relationship with the Father was so good. He had open lines of communication with Him all the time. He abided in the Father daily and impacted the world for Him.

Luke 9:23 states, “And Jesus was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.” Underline, highlight, or circle the word ‘daily.’ That is how often we are to humble ourselves. That is how often we are to maintain spiritual discipline in our lives. That is how often we are to abide in Christ. And it is from that place of humility, discipline and abiding in Christ that we bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

Do we want to be used by God? Do we want to experience the joy of doing the Lord’s will? If we are willing to deny self, if we are willing to lead disciplined lives, we make ourselves available to be used by God to spread the kingdom. That is because the attitude of our heart is God’s will first. And that should be the attitude of our heart. Remember that sin is doing our own will rather than the will of God. It is following the devices and desires of our own hearts rather than seeking to draw close to God. That is choosing death for ourselves. Seeking to do the will of God above our own will is choosing life. It is trusting Him rather than trusting ourselves. If we trust Him, we will do His will in the way in which He tells us to do it, and we will bear much fruit. All because we are disciplined in our attitude and in our thinking and in our actions.

And it is not easy. No matter what stage of life we are in, no matter how long we have been in Christ being humble and disciplined is difficult. Our flesh often gets in the way. We fail

sometimes. That's why we have to consciously deny ourselves of the things we would rather be doing, and instead spend time engaging in the spiritual disciplines. We turn the television off and spend time reading the Scriptures and praying. We don't buy tickets to the game and instead spend the time in Church worshipping the Lord with fellow believers. We continue to abide in Christ. We make sure that it is Christ that rules our hearts and not ourselves.

Christ had the attitude of humility and maintained discipline in His life. He abided in His Father. He set the example for us to follow. During this season of Lent may we look to Christ. May we seek to follow His example. May we be humble, deny ourselves, and follow Christ, abiding in Him, seeking to do His will every day, and bear fruit for the Kingdom of God. And may we continue to grow in this life of spiritual discipline not just in Lent, but throughout our lives.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!