

“Growing in Stature and Favor with God” 12-27-15 CHC

1Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17

As we pick up the pieces of our lives and activities after Christmas, eat the leftovers, and say goodbye to friends and family, we begin to settle in to our regular schedules. We’re now preparing to wind up 2015 and prepare for 2016.

We pause to reflect on the trajectory of our lives. How are we doing? What went well last year? What didn’t? What do I need to do differently this year? Am I in the right place, doing the right thing? What challenges, burdens, and joys stand out?

Our Old Testament text features a boy, Samuel. He is the product of the many prayers and tears of his mother, Hannah. As her firstborn, Hannah dedicates him to the Lord, offering him to the mentorship of Eli the priest. So Samuel grows up in the temple at Shiloh learning how to minister to the Lord and people as a priest.

However, the House of Eli is corrupt. His sons, Phinehas and Hophni, act as if they are immune to the moral and ethical demands of their roles as priests. They would not listen to the corrective voice of their father. Eli had heard of the violations of their priestly practice and how they laid with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Their father asks, “Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people?” They are, of course, sinning against God and will be accountable to the Lord.

As life sometimes has it, we may escape the judgment of others or society. On the other hand, when we commit moral treason, shattering the lives of other people, we ultimately betray ourselves before God, suffering the consequences. So it was with the sons of Eli.

Character will determine destiny. Our scripture texts make that clear. We hear these words attributed to Samuel, “Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and favor with the Lord and with the people”. In the gospel reading of the day Luke tells this; “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52).

How we are before God affects how we are before people. It has a lot to do with who our audience might be. Andrew Carnegie observed that when we discuss our plans and endeavors, “we automatically think of notions like ‘aims’, ‘ambition’, ‘achievements’, ‘assessment’, and so on. But we often overlook the vital part of ‘audience’” (“The Call”, Os Guinness, p.73).

Who was Jesus’ audience? Samuel’s? Phinehas and Hophni’s? A vital truth of following God is this: “A life lived listening to the decisive call of God is a life lived before an audience that trumps all others---the Audience of One” (Guinness).

Look at Abraham’s call with me for a moment. God appears before Abraham and says, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless”. Samuel and Jesus, along with Abraham, knew that to follow the call of God is to live before the heart of God. Jesus could stress that the Father ‘knows’ and

'sees' every sparrow that falls and the hairs of our heads. He makes the point that all we do be done in secret, avoiding the parade of public virtue or to give and do good deeds for recognition and honor. Jesus says, "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you".

A 19th Century British Christian, General Charles Gordon writes; "the more one feels, in order to keep from shipwreck, the necessity of steering by the Polar Star, i.e. in a word leave to God alone, and never pay attention to the smiles or favors of people; if God smiles on you, neither the frown or smile of people can affect you".

After Gordon's death, his friend John Bonar wrote Gordon's brother: "What at once, and always struck me was the way in which his oneness with God ruled all his actions, and his mode of seeing things. I never knew one who seemed so much to 'endure' as seeing God who is invisible. Gordon seemed to live with God, and for God" (p.77).

Winston Churchill, when asked why he was not stung by a vicious attack from a fellow member of parliament, replied, "If I respected him, I would care about his opinion. But I don't, so I don't.....Nothing is more dangerous than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup Poll---always taking one's pulse and taking one's temperature" (pp.74-5).

So as Samuel learned and grew before the Audience of One, the text saying that he "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people". It was the same with Jesus; "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor".

Hannah's prayer in 1Samuel 2 reflects this reality; "for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed..." (1Samuel 2:3). My actions and your actions are being weighed this very moment by the One who sees all. The effect is both vertical and horizontal.

We've talked about this increase in stature and wisdom before God and people, but what might be the characteristics that define a person who acquires both divine and human favor?

Paul opens the window and allows us to peer inside. He uses the metaphor of clothing. Connected to the Audience of One, or as Paul frames it, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" we reflect God's Spirit working in our lives.

We've all heard the old saying, "Clothes make the person". As far back as ancient times there has existed the belief that what we wear determines, in some fashion, the type of life that we lead.

A police officers' uniform carries with it a set of expectations of how those who wear that uniform will act in the course of their duties. Many in our society witness a dissonance regarding the behaviors of some police who wear the uniform with particular actions in relationship to the public being served.

I read a brief article this past week making mention of recent conflicts over passenger attire worn on airplanes. The civility and modesty assumed in the early days of air travel have increasingly devolved into 'in-your-face' demonstrations of personal preference. It occurs regardless of the offense to others.

Airlines don't generally have set dress codes. However, as private companies, airlines can and do draw the line between what is acceptable dress or not. One woman was reprimanded showing too much cleavage. A man with a four letter expletive on his t-shirt was asked to put something over it or get off the plane. Another individual is barred from a flight because his shirt says 'Terrorists gonna kill us all', an intentionally misspelled message that he says is protest against racial profiling. During the 'Leave it to Beaver' era I recall my parents requiring me to put on a coat and tie for traveling on the airplane (Homiletics, Nov.-Dec. 2015, p. 72).

What do the clothes we wear say about us? Of course, we may apply that literally or metaphorically. In Paul's reflection we are talking about those things about us which define our spiritual, psychological, and emotional character. How do we understand the personal characteristics providing stature and favor with the Lord and people?

What expresses our character as "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved," consists of a collection of attitudes. How we live and act, our relationship with God and people, points to the One in whose image we are made.

The first item of our 'character clothing' is compassion. Literally, this is the capacity to have sympathy for others and their life situations. The person giving us a hard time at work, the bad behavior of someone driving inappropriately, or the person acting out in a public situation probably reflects something else going on in that person's life. As psychologists will tell us, when someone is acting out, the issue is usually not the issue. Compassion moves us to reach out to people where they are. It is to find ways to love them regardless of how they are reacting.

Kindness comes next in Paul's list. Often we categorize people by how they dress. Their demeanor possibly draws a judgment from us. Racial bias or profiling falls into this category. Kindness chooses to step across that line and shows consideration of the other person, willing to pay attention to their needs.

Humility is a characteristic particularly rooted in the character of Christ. It is the ability to esteem the needs of another as important or even more important than my own. St. Augustine writes that, "It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes humans as angels". Paul, talking about the character and heart of Jesus puts it this way; "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Philippians 2:4-7). This is the character trait most underappreciated and sought out in our culture.

Paul then uses a word that carries with it more negative than positive connotations. Sometimes equated with gentleness, it is descriptive of the capacity to be courteous and considerate of another. I waive my right of personal gain to lift another person up. Jesus and Moses are described as meek. I like Rick Warren's thoughts on this: "We've lost the true meaning of meekness. Meekness doesn't mean weak...Meekness really means strength under control. The Greek word referred to a wild horse tamed or medicine that could tame a fever" (Homiletics, p.71).

Paul's final characteristic in the composite of traits is patience. Sometimes I have it and sometimes I don't. How do we express its meaning? It is the ability not to become frustrated and angry when someone might intrude on me or things don't go my way. I choose the path of understanding and forgiveness instead. Paul mentions the many ways we test the Lord with our sin yet how through it all God remains patient with us.

Behind this lies the next statement. "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive". This embraces compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, all characteristics found in the character and nature of God reflected in Christ.

This composite finds its embrace in the cloak of love. "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony". Love is the revealing presence of Christ in our lives. According to 1Corinthians 13 love is patient, kind, not self-seeking, keeps no records of wrongs, and always seeks and rejoices in truth.

Paul recognizes that reflecting Christ in us is a work in progress. We all are a work in progress along with the community of the church. Sometimes we act as "God's chosen ones" and sometimes we don't. Worship, community, and forgiveness become crucial. Availing ourselves of bible study, teaching, "allowing the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts and letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in wisdom and with gratitude in our hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God" are the vehicles to becoming and maintaining the stature of favor before God and others.

All of this becomes the source of our gratitude and the pulse of our lives as we relate to God and one another. So I leave you with Paul's final admonition; "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him".