

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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A PORTRAIT OF HUMILITY

Numbers 12:1-15

When we last caught up with Moses, he had just come down from the mountain after meeting with God for 40 days, only to discover chaos in the camp of Israel at the foot of the mountain. While he was up on the mountain, his brother Aaron, at the insistence of the people, had made an idol in the form of a golden calf that the people proceeded to worship (Exodus 32). Both before he went down from the mountain and after, Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the Israelite people, asking the Lord to have mercy on them, despite the fact that they were such a stiff-necked, stubborn, sinful people. Just like people today. Just like us.

When we encounter Moses and his siblings in Numbers 12, it has been about 14 months (one year and two months – see Numbers 10:11) since the exodus from Egypt. The people of Israel spent nearly a year camped at the foot of Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19:1-2) until the Lord instructed them to resume their journey toward the Promised Land of Canaan. Shortly after their departure from Sinai, Moses encounters unexpected opposition from his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron. Let's read about it in Numbers 12:1-15. And let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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“Moses,” it says in verse 3, “was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.” That is a pretty bold statement, isn't it? If someone were to say it of me, you all know it wouldn't be true. Because I'm not. I think it is safe to say you're not either. If you think I'm wrong about you, you're not as humble as you think. All of us can point to humbling or embarrassing moments in our lives. If I told you about some of mine, we could be here all day.

I'm sure you've seen the TV commercials featuring “the most interesting man in the world” who drinks a certain brand of beer. Is that what makes him the most interesting man in the world? How do you decide who the most interesting person in the world is?

GOAT (G-O-A-T) is an acronym sometimes used in the world of sports. It stands for “Greatest of all time.” You can debate whether LeBron James or Michael Jordan is the greatest basketball player of all time. You can debate if Tom Brady or Peyton Manning or Joe Montana or someone else is the greatest quarterback of all time. Or if Tiger Woods has a chance to surpass Jack Nicklaus as the greatest golfer of all time.

You can debate who was the greatest U. S. President of the 20th century. Or the greatest “American Idol” winner. Or the greatest philosopher or scientist or philanthropist who ever lived.

How do you decide? And what are we to make of this bold pronouncement about the humility of Moses in verse 3? It gets even more complicated if you believe, as I do, that Moses is the primary author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Mosaic authorship of these five books has been the dominant view of biblical scholars for the last 3,000 years or more, and it is what I believe. But, we have to ask: Would the most humble person on the face of the earth declare himself to be the most humble person on the face of the earth?

The NIV translation resolves this dilemma by putting verse 3 in parentheses, which I believe is appropriate, since it seems apparent that the words of verse 3 about the humility of Moses were added by an unnamed writer under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, because it is something God wants us to know. God wants us to see the humility Moses displayed in his life – in this instance, in his relationship with his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron.

What is going on here in Numbers 12 appears to be a case of sibling rivalry. There is envy in the hearts of Miriam and Aaron. They are envious of Moses' privileged position as God's appointed leader of the people of Israel. They think they deserve as much respect, honor, and prestige as their baby brother. Miriam especially has allowed the bitter seeds of envy to take root in her heart, and she persuades Aaron to join her in a campaign of grumbling against Moses.

Notice that they do not attack Moses' leadership directly. Instead, they choose to criticize his marriage. Verse 1 says they began their campaign of criticism against Moses "because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite woman." We know Moses was married to Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, a Midianite. Is it Zipporah they are upset about? Usually, in the Bible, Cush refers not to Midian but to Ethiopia. It is possible that Zipporah was of mixed Midianite-Cushite ancestry, in which case Miriam and Aaron use "Cushite" as a derogatory term because of Zipporah's dark complexion.

It is more likely the case that Zipporah has died, and Moses has married a woman of Cushite (Ethiopian) ancestry, a decision that, for some reason, has given Miriam and Aaron heartburn. Or, at least, it has given them a pretext for challenging Moses' leadership. Their complaint about his marriage is not the real issue. It is just a smokescreen. It is really about Moses' status. In their humble opinion, they deserve the same status, the same authority, the same honor and recognition, the same power and prestige as their brother.

This is a situation in which the humility of Moses comes into clear focus. Notice what he doesn't do when he comes under attack. He doesn't try to defend himself. He doesn't go on the offensive against them. He doesn't lash out in anger. He doesn't play the "God-card" to put them in their place. He is content to leave the matter in God's hands. So he says nothing. Sometimes, when you come under attack, when someone criticizes you unfairly, the best thing to do is to do nothing. Not always. But sometimes. Sometimes it is best simply to leave the matter to God to sort out as He chooses. Moses concludes that this is one of those occasions. His refusal to retaliate against Miriam and Aaron is not a sign of weakness. It is actually a sign of his inner strength, a strength of character forged during 40 long years spent as a shepherd in Midian.

While Moses chooses to remain silent, God has something to say about the complaint of Miriam and Aaron. He summons all three of them – Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – to the tabernacle, where He reaffirms the preeminence of Moses and chastises Miriam and Aaron for their presumptuous pride and rebellion born of envy. Their grumbling is not only an act of disloyalty to Moses, it is an affront to God. The result, as we see in verse 9, is that “the anger of the Lord burned against” Aaron and Miriam.

The Bible tells us again and again that the Lord is merciful and gracious. He is slow to anger and abounding in love. He is a compassionate and forgiving God. But sin still has consequences. For Miriam, the consequence is being stricken with a form of leprosy. She is covered from head to toe with patchy, scaly, flaky skin that causes great discomfort. Oh – and it requires being quarantined outside the camp, cut off from the community of Israel.

When Aaron sees what has happened to Miriam, he confesses their sinful folly to Moses and pleads for mercy. Moses, who might have taken some personal satisfaction or even pleasure in Miriam’s punishment, immediately cries out to the Lord to heal her. Though Miriam and Aaron have attacked him and criticized him unfairly, he does not hold a grudge against them. He refuses to let any root of bitterness grow up in his heart to cause trouble. It is a portrait of humility.

By God’s decree, Miriam must remain outside the camp for seven days, her period of confinement and penitence to serve as an object lesson for the people of Israel, showing how seriously God takes the sins of presumptuous pride, envy, and disloyalty to Him. It is a vivid illustration of the biblical truth that “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

You may ask why Miriam was punished with this leprous condition, but not Aaron. The Bible doesn’t say. It seems reasonable to conclude that Miriam must have been the instigator. It must have been her idea.

As for Moses, he came to personify humility. The Bible doesn’t say that Moses was the most humble man who ever lived. During his own lifetime, yes, and possibly until Jesus arrived on the scene, Moses was the most humble person in the world. But it wasn’t always that way. He wasn’t always so humble. “Humble” was not an attribute you would have associated with him when he was growing up as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. I doubt that humility came any more naturally to Moses than it does to any of us.

It was in the years he spent in obscurity as a shepherd in Midian, after running for his life from Egypt, that Moses learned the grace of humility. During those decades in the desert, the Lord performed spiritual surgery on Moses’ heart, preparing him for his life’s mission, cultivating in him a heart of humility, trust, and willing submission to the Lord.

The prophet Micah says that what the Lord wants from us is to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with (our) God” (Micah 6:8). It didn’t happen overnight – in fact, it took decades – but Moses learned to do that. He learned to walk humbly with God. He learned that God did not need him, but he needed God. Just like us. God does not need me. He does

not need you. But you and I need God. As desperately and totally as Moses needed God. Which, it seems to me, is one of the essential keys to cultivating true humility and walking humbly with God.

I've been talking about humility without stopping long enough to define what it is. Dictionaries generally define it as a low or modest opinion of oneself or one's importance or status. Sometimes it is defined by its opposite, as in: Humility is freedom from pride or arrogance.

A definition that has gained traction in Christian circles is that humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less (Rick Warren). It is a catchy description, and there is value in it. Most of us think of ourselves too much. We are preoccupied with ourselves. But we also have an inclination to think too highly of ourselves. The Bible warns against this in Romans 12:3, where Paul says: "By the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." You can't be humble and puffed up with pride at the same time. You can't be humble and think that you're better than other people. Humility requires that we have a proper estimate of ourselves. Especially, of ourselves before God.

I have two smallish books on humility by Christian authors, one by C. J. Mahaney and the other by John Dickson. You have to have a lot of chutzpah (or something) to write a book on humility, don't you think? Poking fun at himself, Dickson says he suggested the following title for his book: *Humility and How I Achieved It*. His publisher didn't go for it.

Both Dickson and Mahaney are very transparent about their own lack of and need for humility. Dickson defines humility as "the noble choice to forgo your status (and to) deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself", not for personal gain (Dickson, 24). This is the trait I see in Moses, as he constantly goes to bat for the people of Israel.

Mahaney offers a more theological definition. "Humility," he says, "is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God's holiness and our sinfulness" (Mahaney, 22). I've talked recently about Robert Burns' insight into the value of seeing ourselves as others see us. True humility, though, comes from seeing God as He is and seeing ourselves as He sees us.

You may not be great or important in the eyes of the world. You may never be the GOAT – the Greatest of all time – in any field of endeavor. You may never achieve even 15 minutes of fame. You may never get the attention of the world. But true humility gets God's attention (Mahaney, 19). Listen to what the Lord says in Isaiah 66:2:

This is the one I esteem:
(The one) who is humble and contrite in spirit,
And trembles at my word.

Or, think of the first beatitude in Matthew 5:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Not: Blessed are the proud. Or: Blessed are the self-righteous. But: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Who are the poor in spirit? The poor in spirit are those who know they need God. The poor in spirit are those who are humble enough to admit that they need God. And look to God. Like Moses.

The world could use more humility. The church could use more humility. True humility – not the phony, hypocritical kind that masks a heart of pride or self-righteousness – looks good on you and me. The Bible says it is part of the wardrobe, along with compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love, in which God wants us to clothe ourselves (Colossians 3:12-14).

Moses, of course, was not the most humble person who ever lived. The most humble person who ever lived is Jesus. He is the supreme example of humility. When He says of Himself in Matthew 11:29, “I am gentle and humble in heart,” it is not an empty boast. It is the truth – a truth demonstrated in His incarnation, in the whole course of His life on earth, and then in His suffering and death on the cross for us. Though He was fully God, the Bible says:

He did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
but made Himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled Himself to death –
even death on a cross.
(Philippians 2:6-8)

For us. He did it all, He gave it all, for us.

As much as we may laud the example of Moses’ humility, it is not enough for us to aspire to be like him. Our hope of salvation is not in Moses. Moses is not the one in whom we trust. Our hope is found in Jesus alone, who personified humility beyond all measure and comparison in giving His life on the cross as a sacrifice for us. He is the most humble person ever. The most worthy, too. And now He is exalted beyond all measure forever.

Lord, let it be so now and always. To the glory of Your name. Amen.