

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 5, 2020**

WALKING HUMBLY WITH GOD

Micah 6:8

I hope you will indulge me for a few moments. I want to say “Happy Birthday” to America. On July 4, 1776, 244 years ago yesterday, the representatives to the 2nd Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, asserting that the 13 English colonies in America “are, and of right ought to be free and independent states.” It was, figuratively speaking, a shot heard “round the world.” It provided the philosophical, political, and, one might say, theological underpinning to the revolution that birthed our nation.

Now, here we are, 244 years later, and these, once again, are times that try our souls. And not just because of the coronavirus and the impact it has had on life both here in America and around the world. Political and racial unrest are rampant. The promise of America, as set forth in the Declaration of Independence, has not yet been fully met. America remains an imperfect union, though, as the United States Constitution states, “to form a more perfect union” has been one of our founding principles from the very beginning.

With all of America’s problems past and present – and we’ve got plenty, which is what you should expect in a country populated entirely and exclusively by sinners who daily fall short of the glory of God – America is still the beacon of freedom in the world. This country is still the place that millions and millions of people around the world desire to come to.

Is America an imperfect union? Of course it is.

Is everything about America right and good? Of course not.

Can we be better and do better? Of course we can.

Have we lived up to our founding principles, principles that affirm the equality of every person’s dignity and worth, and declare that all persons are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”? Not fully. Not yet.

Is America a chosen nation? Are we a chosen people? No. Not in a biblical sense. America is not the new Israel. The American people have not replaced the Jewish people in any way that can be supported from the Bible. It is arrogant and wrong-headed to believe that God has chosen America the same way He chose Israel to be His people. God has not said to our nation what He said to the Jewish people.

Listen to what Moses said to the people of Israel about their chosen-ness in Deuteronomy 7: “You are a people holy [set apart] to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession.

The LORD did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath He swore to your ancestors that He brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore” – and never forget – “that the LORD your God is God; He is the faithful God, who keeps His covenant of love” to His people (Deuteronomy 7:6-9).

The chosen-ness of Israel was not conditioned on its greatness or goodness. It was conditioned solely on the greatness, goodness, love, and sovereign choice of God.

This truth illuminates the call to walk humbly with God, as Micah says in our keynote verse for these last few weeks. The blessing of God is never owed to us as individuals or as a country because of our goodness or virtue. It is bestowed upon us as a gift of God’s grace.

Has America been blessed by God? Supremely. Incomparably.

Does America deserve God’s blessing and favor? No nation deserves the favor and blessing of God. But we in America have received immeasurable gifts from the hand of God. For these gifts – abundant natural resources, religious freedom, a worldview shaped by Judeo-Christian values, freedom of speech and opportunity, a system of government that despite its flaws is the best on earth, and governing principles that (when practiced properly) really do promote liberty and justice for all – for these gifts, and many more, we should be truly and humbly grateful to God.

As we resolve to face our sins and to repent of them as individuals and as a nation, let us also thank God for the blessings we have received from His hand.

Is America the hope of the world? No. Jesus is.

Can the right person in the Oval Office fix what is wrong with America? No. He or she can make a difference, for better or worse. But there is only one Savior. Jesus is the hope of our nation.

As the song says, He is the hope of the nations. He is the comfort of all who mourn. He is the source of heaven’s hope on earth. He is the light in the darkness, the truth in each circumstance, the source of heaven’s light on earth. He is the hope living in us, the rock in whom we trust, the light shining for all the world to see. (Brian Doerksen, “Jesus, Hope of the Nations”)

Celebrate America’s birthday? Absolutely. But put your hope in Jesus, where it belongs.

I love this country. I pray that God will continue to bless America and make this the nation He desires us to be. And I pray that America – all of us – will bless and honor God.

I think Jesus wanted me to share this with you today.

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Now let's look again at Micah 6:8. Listen as I read it:

He has showed you, O man (O people), what is good.
 And what does the Lord require of you?
 To do justice (act justly) and to love mercy
 And to walk humbly with your God.

What does God want? As we have seen in recent weeks, God wants us to beat the drum of justice for *all* people, to stand up and speak up for those who are mistreated, who are denied or deprived of justice in a land where we believe in liberty and justice for all. God wants us to be people of justice who treat others justly and insure that others are treated fairly, regardless of the color of their skin, their religion or politics or socio-economic status.

In addition, God wants us to be people of mercy, people who love mercy and kindness, people who make mercy and kindness a way of life, people who show mercy to those who do not deserve it. By definition, of course, nobody *deserves* mercy. If you deserve mercy, it isn't mercy anymore. Nobody *deserves* mercy. But everybody *needs* mercy. You need it. I need it. We all need it. We all need God's mercy, because what we justly deserve is God's judgment. We all need mercy, because we are all sinners. We have all sinned and daily we fall short of the standard of God's glory. The good news is that God *is* merciful to sinners. Because of what Jesus has done for us in His saving work on the cross, God does not treat us as our sins deserve. He is merciful and gracious to us.

People who have received mercy are to show mercy to others. People who have received mercy are to be merciful to others. We are all broken people. In a sense, it is our brokenness that makes us human. As Bryan Stevenson writes in *Just Mercy* (289): "Sometimes we're fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we are shattered by things we would never have chosen" – by things that happen to us. We are all broken by sin, by our own sin and the sinfulness of the world in which we live. It is only by the mercy of Jesus, by the grace of the gospel, that we can be healed and put back together again. The mercy and grace of Jesus in our own lives compel us and must propel us to extend mercy and grace to others, including those we consider the least deserving. Because we are all the least deserving.

Beat the drum of justice for those who are mistreated.

Show mercy and kindness to others as a way of life.

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Third, says Micah, walk humbly with God. The Bible often uses the word "walk" to refer to a way of life. Paul, for example, says to the Colossians: "Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (Colossians 2:6-7). "Walk" is a metaphor for how you live your life.

So Micah is telling us that what God wants is for us to live with a heart attitude of humility toward Him. I have thought of writing a book about the most humiliating moments of my life, each chapter recounting a particularly embarrassing experience I've had. Maybe I'll share some of them with you sometime. You may especially like the story about the first time I donated blood. I'm not going to tell you today. This is just a teaser. Maybe I'll tell you about it next week. I'll bet we have all had embarrassing moments when we have felt humiliated. Maybe those moments have had the effect of making us more humble.

The thing is: There is a difference between being humble and being humiliated. God is not interested in humiliating us. I don't think He takes any pleasure in our humiliation. But He is interested in making us humble.

We saw a few weeks ago in James 3 that honest-to-goodness humility is a sign of wisdom. James says that if you have wisdom and understanding, it will be evident in the way you live, "by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (3:13). James may have gotten this idea from Proverbs 11:2, which says:

When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom.

Humility leads to wisdom. And humility comes from wisdom. In Romans 12:3, Paul says that we are to have a sober estimate of ourselves and not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. A "sober" view of ourselves means not inflated or elevated or exaggerated. It means having an accurate, realistic view of ourselves, including both our strengths and weaknesses. It means seeing ourselves as we are, not as we want others to see us. In its fullest sense, it means seeing ourselves as God sees us. Nothing in your life, good or bad, is hidden from God. He knows every detail about your life. You can fool other people into thinking you are better than you are. You can even fool yourself. But you can't fool God. Your life is an open book to God. Mine, too. He knows every word you're going to say before you say it. So it is no use trying to make God think you're better than you are.

God detests self-righteousness. You know that, don't you? He hates it when we put our "righteousness" on parade, when we try to show how much better we are than other people. This can be a serious problem for religious people.

Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18 (verses 9-14) shows what He thinks about people who broadcast their religiosity. Luke frames the story with this introduction: "To those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable" (18:9). The story of the Pharisee – a deeply religious man – and a morally-compromised collaborator with Rome who cheated people to make a living could not have presented a more stark contrast. By all appearances, the Pharisee was good and the tax collector bad. While the Pharisee trumpeted his goodness, hoping for the accolades of anyone who might hear his self-serving prayer, the other man – the despised tax collector – could only cry out to God for mercy, knowing what a despicable, deplorable sinner he was.

How does the story end? Jesus says that this humble, repentant tax collector, not the self-righteous religious leader, went home justified before God. He, not the man who advertised his moral and spiritual superiority, was made right with God. “For everyone who exalts himself (or herself) will be humbled, but those who humble themselves (before God) will be exalted” (18:14b).

Many people have pointed out that being humble doesn't mean thinking less of yourself; it means thinking of yourself less. There is at least a grain of truth in this. Perhaps more than a grain. People who are proud, who are self-centered and self-righteous, who have an inflated or elevated view of themselves, do think of themselves too much. Most of us think of ourselves too much. I do. I think too much about myself every day. I am constantly thinking about myself, about what I want, about what other people think of me, about my “image.” I think most of you do, too.

God wants us to think less about ourselves. He wants us to think more about Him. He wants us to think more about others and their needs and desires. He wants us to shift our focus away from ourselves. He wants us to put our focus on Him. He wants us to fix our eyes on Jesus. He wants us to be more concerned with what people think of Him than we are with what people think of us.

So, part of humility is thinking of ourselves less. But if, like the self-righteous Pharisee, we think too highly of ourselves, then walking humbly with God requires us to think less highly of ourselves. We need to see ourselves as God sees us and to rest in His boundless mercy and grace.

God takes great pleasure in humility. Psalm 147 says:

(The LORD) heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.
He determines the number of the stars
and calls each one by name.
Great is our Lord and mighty in power;
His understanding has no limit.
The LORD sustains the humble
but casts the wicked to the ground.
(Psalm 147:3-6)

God sustains the humble. He blesses those who know they need Him and who depend on His grace in the course of daily life.

Listen to another verse from the Psalms. This is Psalm 149:4:

The LORD takes delight in His people;
He crowns the humble with salvation.

Not the proud or the self-righteous or the person who rejects God. The person who receives the gift of salvation and enjoys fellowship with God is the one who is humble before God, the one who walks humbly with God.

The Bible has much more to say about humility and walking humbly with God. Let me leave you with one more Bible verse. Both James and Peter quote a verse from Proverbs (3:34), which says that “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). God. Gives. Grace. To. The. Humble.

If you’re like me and you need grace (you are and you do), then this is a powerful incentive to pursue humility. People who are proud, people who are self-righteous, people who think they are self-sufficient, think they don’t need grace. They think they are good enough, strong enough, smart enough to earn God’s favor or to make it through life without God.

A humble heart is a receptacle for God’s grace. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.