

HUMBLEBRAG

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Luke 18:15-30

Harris Wittels was a comedian and a television writer and a TV producer who coined a new word for our language. Unfortunately, Mr. Wittels died last year at a young age. But his word, I believe, will live on.

The word that Mr. Wittels created about five years ago is **humblebrag**—a conflation of the words humble and bragging. He developed this word out his growing frustration at the way that people would post messages of false modesty on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter.

One of the more famous humblebrags was made by former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer. He once lamented on Twitter, “They just announced my flight at LaGuardia is number 15 for takeoff. I miss Air Force One!!” He is reminding us through this light-hearted complaint that he used to fly with the president. Now he has to travel with the rest of us.

Many humblebrags come from celebrities who write things like: “Just stepped in gum. Who spits gum on the red carpet?” or “My emails send so slowly over here in Cannes! So frustrated!” Can you hear the bragging accompanied by the petty complaining. The person wants us to feel sympathy for them but they also want us to know just how wonderful their life is. “I’m at a movie premiere and I’m on the red carpet; I’m in Cannes; I’ve flown on Air Force One.”

Celebrities aren’t the only ones making these humblebrags. Regular people do it, too. Here’s one: “I just don’t know how my son got accepted to Harvard with an A- in advanced calculus.” Or, “I had to run to the store. No make-up, sweats, hair’s a mess. And guys are hitting on me.” We get it. You’re beautiful.

Humblebragging is nothing new. People have been expressing false modesty ever since a caveman returned from a hunt complaining that he always seems to kill the biggest ones the farthest away. Wittels idea caught on. He published a book. Articles about humblebragging appeared in the New York Times, The Atlantic, and even Forbes. The Forbes article was about a study out from Harvard that indicates that people don’t like it when someone humblebrags. Pretty obvious to me.

We even see some humblebragging in today’s reading from Luke, specifically in the story of the Rich Young Ruler. But first, let us go back to last week’s reading—the parable about the two men praying in the temple. One of the men, a Pharisee, stood at the front of the temple bragging to God (and anyone else that could hear him) that he fasted twice a week and he tithed a tenth of his income. And he also thanked God that he was not like those other people—thieves, rogues, adulterers,

even that tax collector standing over there. Meanwhile, that tax collector, Jesus points out, is quietly praying himself saying, *God, be merciful to me a sinner*. It was the tax collector, Jesus says, who goes home justified. Jesus wraps up the parable saying, *all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted*. God treasures humility.

From that parable, Luke gives us the story of the people bringing little children to Jesus to be blessed. The disciples told the people not to do this but Jesus straightened them out saying,

*Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them;
for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.
Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God
as a little child will never enter it.*

God desires humility; God desires that we be like little children. What does it mean to be childlike? That is explored in the next pericope—the story The Rich Young Ruler. This story appears in all three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In each account, the man is rich. Mark refers to him as “the man,” Matthew describes him as a “young man,” and Luke identifies him as “a ruler.” We mix all these together and call him “The Rich Young Ruler.”

As a ruler (as Luke describes him), this man was probably a religious official, maybe the president of a local synagogue. He approaches Jesus with a question. He says, *Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* That seems to be a reasonable question, but Jesus asks why he calls him good. And then says, No one is good but God alone.

Then Jesus says, *You know the commandments*, and proceeds to list five of them. The man says, yes, he knows them. Since he was a youth, he has kept all the commandments.

Jesus informs the man that *there is still one thing lacking* and tells him to sell all that he owns and distribute the money to the poor. Then, Jesus says, you will have treasure in heaven. Then he may come and follow Jesus.

We all know how this turns out. In the other gospel accounts, we are told that the man cannot do this because of his wealth. Luke only says that the man *became sad, for he was very rich*. We assume that he was unable to comply.

Then Jesus explains, *How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God*.

Now, how is this an example of humblebragging? Well, the man who comes to Jesus is a ruler, he is a man with power and authority, he has standing in the

community. And he addresses Jesus as *Good Teacher*. In every respect, this man outranks Jesus.

Now, you can argue that the man is just being polite. But I can tell you from experience when someone starts buttering me up, I get suspicious. When they start in saying, Reverend, you are clearly a learned and wise man, virtuous too, may I ask you something? I figure they want something. Their empty flattery doesn't influence me. (Well, it does a little.)

Jesus figures this guy out immediately and when the man calls him good, Jesus corrects him and says, *no one is good but God alone*.

The humble-braggy part is the man's question, *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* No one can do anything to inherit eternal life. Eternal life is a gift of God. We don't earn it or buy it. But this man is asking Jesus what he needs to do. There is a bragging assumption under that question he is a candidate for eternal life. As a Jew, he has been brought up to keep the laws of Moses. Keep these laws and you will be righteous, you will be rewarded.

Jesus says, *You know the commandments*, and then lists five of them. And the man assures Jesus that he has kept all of them since he was young. And no doubt, he had. But Jesus says, There is still on thing missing. Sell all you own and give the money to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me. And the man becomes sad.

What Jesus has done here is to show to the man that, in fact, he had not kept all the commandments. He has not kept the one that says, *you shall have no other gods before me*. He can't part with his wealth. His wealth stands between him and God. It is a god, itself.

The man came to Jesus confident that he would be well-received, even commended for being such an outstanding and well-respected individual, but his wealth gets in the way.

In response, Jesus says to the man *How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God*.

Luke is holding up the impossibility of a huge camel passing through something as impossibly small as a needle. It can't be done without God's help.

I'm reminded of a cartoon in a Christmas issue of the New Yorker magazine depicting some very proper gentlemen, in a very proper club, lifting a very proper glass, to propose a toast: "Here's to the rich, the very rich, the filthy rich. Let's see ... have I left anyone out?"

The conversation between Jesus and the ruler creates a stir among those people observing it because to the average person, someone like the ruler is a shoe-in for salvation. He's done everything right. If he can't be saved, then what hope do the rest of us have. Jesus tells the people that the ordinary rules don't apply. *What is impossible for people is possible for God*. You can be saved, but you must be humble, you must be like a child. In this instance, to be like a little child means to be the opposite of the ruler, to lack power, or wealth, or influence.

Next, Peter and the disciples' turn to step up with their own display of humblebragging. They point out to Jesus that they have left their homes and followed him. Isn't that worth something? They brag that they are with Jesus (it's like flying on Air Force One), but they make mention of their sacrifice to do so.

Jesus assures them that no one who has sacrificed for the kingdom will not be rewarded.

But the key here is the motivation for giving up? Did they sacrifice in order to earn God's favor, or did they sacrifice because it was the right thing to do. Are they humbling themselves in order to be exalted, or are they exalting themselves with false humility? Are they acting like that Pharisee in the parable who loudly declares his sacrifices for God.

Have you ever known someone who, when they did a good deed, made sure you knew all about it and even how it was such an inconvenience for them. "I served lunch at the soup kitchen today, but I had to forfeit my tennis game." Or "I like to give money to the homeless, but I can't figure out how to deduct it from my taxes."

It is possible to help someone without telling the world. It is possible to be truly humble in our approach to God.

As one writer puts it, "The man was very rich; he had everything except the one thing he needed – poverty. To say, You lack one thing, to a rich man, who can buy anything he wants, is a joke, because what he inevitably lacks is not having anything."¹

The ruler in the story was unable to give up, he was unable to have nothing, he was unable to be humble before God. His many possessions got in the way and became a god themselves. Luke is teaching his people through these stories that they too must come before God with a sense of humility, not false humility, no humblebragging allowed. But in true humility, understanding that they are not worthy. But the kingdom is there for them anyway because with God all things are possible. And that is the promise of the kingdom. Amen.

¹ John Fenton in *Finding the Way through Mark*