

The Humble

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¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

²O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.

³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. ⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. ⁹He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. (Psalm 25)

Saint Augustine of Hippo, who lived in the 4th Century, wrote one of the most influential works in Christian history about his own spiritual journey. He titled it *Confessions*, not only because he confessed to many shortcomings and sins, but also because he wanted the book to be a compendium of the things he believed and professed about God, things he wanted to lift up as a lifelong confession of faith. Augustine set the stage clearly with his opening line, which was addressed directly to God. It was a quote from Psalm 145: "Great thou art, and greatly to be praised."

Contrast that to a work written nearly 1,400 years later by the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who very purposely and pointedly borrowed Augustine's title for his own autobiography. Where Augustine had dedicated his work to God, Rousseau went in another direction. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau dedicated his book "to me, with the admiration I owe myself."

And he did not stop there. The first lines of his book are these: "I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself."¹

This seems like a good place to start, because this morning I want to talk about ego. The English language adopted this Latin word for "I" to refer to the self, to a person's individual identity that stands separate and apart from every other identity, every other self. It represents our sense of worth and value. But there is an inherent tension in the concept of ego. We might even say there is a problem with ego.

Ego is, in many ways, a good thing. Our ego shapes our personality and gives us our individuality. Ego tells us that we have our own special place in the world. Ego is the source of our self-confidence, the energy behind our drive to succeed, the motivation we need to

¹ <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/02/the-era-of-the-narcissist>



achieve great things. To know that we are loved and valued just for being ourselves is a mark of emotional health and stability. If you want to picture a healthy ego, just think of some of the most repeated lessons of Mister Rogers... things like “You are special. There is only one [of you] in this wonderful world” ... “you’ve already won in this world because you’re the only one who can be you” ... “our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has or ever will have something inside that is unique to all time.”²

But there is also a darker side to ego. If our ego becomes “exaggerated” or grows too big, it moves beyond worthiness and self-esteem to places that are much less healthy and appealing, like arrogance, conceit, selfishness, and vanity. So, our ego is like the moon above – at any given moment, there is a part that shines in the warmth of the sun, and also a colder side cloaked in darkness.

This age-old tension is seen clearly in Gordon Gecko, the famous character from the movie *Wall Street*, who famously said that

“Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all its forms – greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge – has marked the upward surge of mankind.”

Gecko had a point, but his ego bent any truth in that statement into something self-serving and broken. His material success, envied by so many, was nothing more than a monument to himself. He represents a narcissism that says we need to “Get in and grab what is ours” ... “Only the strong survive” ... “Win at all costs, because if you’re not first, you’re last.”

All of this leads us to Psalm 25, the scripture that begins our spiritual journey over the next six weeks. This psalm is all about ego. More accurately, it is about **humility**. This psalm speaks not to the haughty, or the proud, or the thoroughly self-interested; it speaks to “the humble.” And it presents the humble with a spiritual roadmap by giving us a three-part action plan – three intentional acts that can help us to stay in the light on the bright side of the moon.

The first act is to **lift our eyes up to God**. The opening line sets the stage: “*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust.*” The first thing we have to do is to recognize our human limitations. We have to look beyond our human desires, human goals, and human strategies. In short, we make a decision to embrace the humility of Augustine over the arrogance of Rousseau. The egotistical Rousseau dedicated his autobiography to himself. He set out to glorify himself, satisfy himself, and show admiration to himself. By contrast, Augustine started by humbling himself – taking his eyes off the mirror, and directing them up to God. That is the place to start.

The second step is to **express our worries to God**. If we read the psalm carefully, it is clear that the person who wrote it was feeling vulnerable about a number of things. The poet was worried about their safety and well-being. They were worried that they might be embarrassed or humiliated. They were worried that they might lose, that their enemies might prevail over them. Humility makes us confront the reality that we cannot control everything, that that we cannot fix everything ourselves. Instead of pretending that these

² Alexandra Hurtado, “64 Mister Rogers Quotes That Will Make Today a Beautiful Day,” January 6, 2021, <https://parade.com/954616/alexandra-hurtado/mr-rogers-quotes/>

worries do not exist, we name them and lay them at God's feet. This is not an act of weakness – it is act of honesty, and that makes it an act of strength.

All of us have things that we are having to confront, things that make us nervous or afraid, things that we cannot control. Lent is the perfect time for us to recognize our limitations over these concerns. With humble hearts, as we look to God, we can name our fears and worries and offer them up to Christ. An unhealthy ego says, "I can handle this myself." A healthy ego, balanced by a humble heart, understands the words of the familiar hymn, "*What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear, What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*"

The final act is to open ***ourselves to God's teaching***. This begins by recognizing that we do not have all the answers. I remember a Charlie Brown comic that ran in the newspaper years ago but never left my memory. Snoopy is sitting on top of his red doghouse in front of his typewriter. Charlie Brown comes up and says, "I hear you are writing a book on theology. I hope you have a good title." In the next frame, Snoopy has a thought bubble that says "I have the *perfect* title." The final frame reveals that title, as Snoopy types: "Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might be Wrong?" Charles Shultz, who was a dedicated Sunday School teacher, knew that good theology is always humble. We look for answers, we look for truth, but we never lose sight of the fact that we might be wrong – or that someone else might be right.

This psalm is a big advocate of that healthy kind of humility. Not my ways, but your ways, Lord. Not my path, but your path. "*Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.*"

Last week I got together with my pastor group, which I look forward to every year. We share about how our lives and ministries are going. We talk about sermons, lessons, things that are going on in our congregations. Full disclosure, we also find time for a little golf. The eight of us divide into two foursomes and play a Captain's Choice match, which means that on each hole everyone in the foursome hits a drive, we pick the best one, and then all four of us take a shot from that spot, and then we take the best one of those, and so on until somebody gets the ball into the hole.

I remember a heated match a few years ago when we were neck and neck with the other team. On the back nine we came to a par-3, a short hole where the green is easy to reach in one shot. One of us hit a shot about twenty feet from the hole. It was not an easy putt, but it was a makeable putt. We wanted that birdie. The first putter missed on the low side of the hole. The second saw how the ball had rolled, but he adjusted too much and his ball missed on the high side. We learned a lot from those two putts. It was clear that, if we just split the difference, the putt would have a good chance of rolling into the hole. I am not a great putter, but I managed to put a good swing on my effort. My ball caught the upper edge of the cup and fell in for a team birdie.

You could say I remember that hole so well because this does not happen that often, and you would be right. But I think I remember it because of what one of my playing partners said to me as we walked off the green. The oldest pastor in our group slapped me on the back and said, "I don't care what they say, you are teachable!"

I believe that is the spiritual key to this entire psalm. To be humble is to be teachable. To be humble recognizes that there is always something new to be learned, always a way to be better. An unhealthy ego thinks it always knows the answer. The

humble heart believes in itself, but it can also admit that it might be wrong. The unhealthy ego wants to win at all costs and be the last one standing, but the humble heart believes in the power of teamwork and seeks to find the right path together. "*Good and upright is the Lord,*" the psalmist says. God "*leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.*"

Over the coming weeks I pray that we will lift our eyes up to God, lay our worries at the feet of Christ, and promise God and each other that we will trust God to lead us, teach us, and show us the way. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I pray that we will strive during this Lenten season to be truly teachable. ***Amen.***