

“That Elusive Virtue”

Proverbs 30:1-33

March 12, 2017

Several years ago I came across this intriguing question: What is the one thing that you should always ask God for but never thank God for? Give that a little thought. What is the one thing that you should always ask God for but never thank God for? The answer is humility.

We should ask God to make us humble, but we should also keep in mind that humility is an elusive virtue. It's not one that we will in this life ever master. If you and I ever congratulate ourselves on how humble we are, then we can be pretty sure that we are not nearly as humble as we like to think we are! Humility is an elusive virtue.

Someone once made this wise observation: “Those who travel the high road of humility are not troubled by heavy traffic.” Isn't that true? How many of us have mastered humility?

The Need for Humility

Humility is an elusive virtue, but it is one that we need. The Bible frequently reminds us of that need. Think of this one statement from Jesus: “All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11; 18:14). We need to learn humility.

This morning we are going to explore the subject of humility by looking at Proverbs chapter 30. I need to tell you that for most of my Christian life, I have always thought of Proverbs 30 as one of the strangest passages in all of the Bible. For me Proverbs 30 always seemed to be nothing more than a miscellaneous collection of random and very puzzling sayings. In other words, I knew that Proverbs 30 was part of God's inspired Word, but it didn't do much for me. As a young Christian, I would read it and scratch my head over what I was reading and then quickly move on to Proverbs 31 that talks women and beer! I understood chapter 31 a lot better than chapter 30. But just a year ago, I was reading through Proverbs, and I saw a couple of things in chapter 30 that I had never noticed before. Here's what I observed.

First, Proverbs 30 is a distinct and identifiable literary unit. That's a fancy way of saying that it stands apart all by itself. Look at how it starts. “The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh.” Nobody knows who Agur was, but he is the person responsible for what we find in Proverbs 30. In Proverbs 31 we find wise sayings that come from a different individual, King Lemuel. So chapter 30 stands apart all by itself.

There is a second thing to notice about Proverbs 30, and this is crucial. Proverbs starts and ends by stressing our need for humility.

²“Surely I am only a brute, not a man;
I do not have human understanding.
³I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One.
⁴Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Whose hands have gathered up the wind?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and what is the name of his son?
Surely you know!” (Prov. 30:2-4)

In those verses Agur admits the limits of his own knowledge, and with those last three words he points out to us, his readers, that we are not nearly as smart as we like to think that we are either.

As I have been reading through the Bible recently, I have been taking note of every time I come across something dealing with deception. It's amazing how often the Bible warns us about being deceived. Jesus warns us about deception and so do his apostles.¹

Could you and I ever be taken in by some false and harmful religious teaching? We'd like to say, "Oh no, that could never happen to me! After all, I've been going to church all my life. I have taught Sunday School and led a small group. I graduated from Oak Hills Christian College. I'll never be deceived!" If you and I think that we cannot be deceived, then we have already been deceived! There is no more dangerous deception than thinking that you cannot be deceived!

None of us are as smart as we like to think that we. That's how the sayings of Agur start, and that's how they end too.

³² "If you play the fool and exalt yourself,
or if you plan evil,
clap your hand over your mouth! [Why?]
³³ For as churning cream produces butter,
and as twisting the nose produces blood,
so stirring up anger produces strife." (Prov. 30:32-33)

In other words, don't be such a fool as to think that you can escape the consequences of your own decisions. If you deceive yourself into thinking that you can get away with evil, think again! It will catch up with you! Do not fall for the idea that somehow you are the exception to the rule. You're not.

That's the message of Proverbs 30. We are not as smart as we think we are. The way that Proverbs 30 starts and ends provides us with a hint that everything in between should be understood as having something to do with humility too.

The Meaning of Humility

What is humility? How should we define it and think about it? Right after Agur stresses our need for humility in verses 2 through 4, he goes on to explain its meaning.

⁵ "Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him." (Prov. 30:5)

To put it very simply, humility according to Proverbs 30 is learning to live according to God's truth. Humility means that you learn how God created reality. You and I may not always like everything God tells us about how he created this world, but you choose to live according to what God says is true anyway. That is the humility that Proverbs 30 is teaching about.

Please note that verse 5 teaches us that living according to God's truth is ultimately for our good. It may not always be fun, but "God is a shield to those who take refuge in him." Do you want to minimize the amount of trouble you'll face in life? Read the Bible. Learn what God says is true about life. God knows more about life than "Dear Abby." He is smarter than any of your friends. He is more reliable than anything you will find on Facebook.

⁶ "Do not add to his words,
or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar." (Prov. 30:6)

That is a warning. Be sure that you also do not distort what God teaches in his Word. We need that warning. People so often take what the Bible says but then twist it so that it comes out saying what they want to hear.

¹ Matt. 7:15; 24:4, 11, 24; Mark 4:19; 7:22; Rom. 1:18, 21-22, 25; 7:11; 16:18; 2 Cor. 11:13-15; Eph. 4:14; 5:6; 1 Tim. 1:13-14; 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:13; Tit. 1:10; 1 John 4:1; 2 John 7.

Think about the word “grace.” Today “grace” so often conveys the idea that God loves you and affirms you *whatever it is that you are doing*. You can live anyway you want, and God will give you his stamp of approval. Why? Because God loves you unconditionally!

But that is not the genuine grace of God that we read about in the Bible. According to the Bible, God invites all of us to trust in his Son, so that we can receive new life in him. And that invitation is unconditional! God extends it to all of us no matter what we have done in the past and no matter how undeserving we are. When we confess our sins, he delights—that is not too strong a word—in forgiving us for the things that we are most ashamed of having done. Thank God for his generous grace! But God also calls us to repentance. He calls us to give up those sinful habits that we have developed. God in his grace provides us with the strength that we need to fight temptation so that we can become the people he wants us to be.

We need to read the Bible carefully to learn what God truly teaches us about grace—and about every other subject too. Humility is learning to live according to God’s truth. We need to humble ourselves before God and what he says is true.

The Practice of Humility

Proverbs 30:2-4 impress on us our need for humility. Verses 5 and 6 teach us the meaning of humility. Let’s think now about the actual practice of humility. Beginning at verse 7 and running through verse 31 we find all kinds of different subjects being addressed. Here are some areas of life to consider when it comes to living humbly.

In our Scripture reading this morning we read what Agur teaches us on several subjects. In verses 7 through 9, he talks about the deceptive power of money. In verses 10 through 14 he warns us about our attitude toward other people. And in verses 15 through 17 he gives us a picture of what we are like when we lack any sense of contentment. Those are all important subjects, but they are fairly easy to understand. So I would like us to concentrate on the more puzzling parts of Agur’s instructions.

¹⁸ “There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four that I do not understand:
¹⁹ the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a young woman.” (Prov. 30:18-19)

What exactly is Agur talking about? To start with—what does he mean when he says, “There are three . . . no, four”? That is nothing more than a literary expression to get our attention. I think of something that my mom used to say to me as a little boy, “Fred, if I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times.” When I heard my mom say that to me, I knew that she was not trying to teach me a math lesson! She wanted to get my attention. It’s the same kind of thing here. Agur uses a rhetorical device to get our attention.

Of course, that doesn’t really solve the problem that we have with verses 18 and 19, does it? What is Agur’s point in drawing these comparisons? One Old Testament scholar said that if Agur’s purpose was to be mysterious and keep us guessing, then he certainly succeeded!² That’s true, isn’t it? Over all of the centuries that the people of God have had the Bible, no one has ever come up with an absolutely satisfactory explanation of these two verses.

The key word is found in verse 18: “amazing.” “There are three things that are too amazing for me.” And the most likely explanation is that Agur is amazed at the way that the animals and the ship move. Have you ever watched an eagle slowly circling in the sky? There is a certain kind of mesmerizing beauty about it, isn’t there? Then that eagle swoops down over the lake and grabs a fish. When we see the eagle making its dive toward the water, we can’t take our eyes off of it, can we? Picture yourself walking along a path and a

² Roger N. Whybray, *Book of Proverbs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 177, quoted in Allen Ross, “Proverbs” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, *Psalms – Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 1123-1124.

snake suddenly darts across in front of you. How can an animal that has no feet cover so much ground so quickly? Then there is “the way of a ship on the high seas.” How can that ship move one way when the wind is blowing another way? All three of those examples describe forms of motion that amaze us. And isn’t that true about “the way of a man with a young woman”?

There is something amazing about how two people fall in love. A boy is attracted to a girl, but he’s scared of being rejected by her. Finally, he overcomes his fear and nonchalantly says, “Would you like to go out for a cup of coffee?” She responds, “What took you so long! How much courage did it take to invite me out for coffee?” No, that’s not what she says! That’s what she thinks, but that is not what she says. Instead she coolly responds. “I’m pretty busy right now, but I suppose I could.” So they go out for coffee, and over time they gradually get to know each other. They find that they do have some things in common. They discover that they really enjoy being together. Eventually they admit that that they are actually crazy about each other!

Don’t we all enjoy love stories? How many movies have you seen that contain a love story? It would be better to ask how many movies you have ever seen that don’t have a romantic element in them. I haven’t seen this movie, but I have it on good authority—my granddaughter—that in *The Lego Batman Movie* the Caped Crusader has a crush on Commissioner Gordon’s daughter. (That is not a spoiler! It is not a major part of the movie, but it is there.) Think about it. Even in a fictional story about miniature superheroes made out of plastic blocks, we find romance! There is something about love stories that we just find irresistible.

That’s the way that God has made us. Here is God saying to us through Agur, “Learn to respect love. Love between a woman and a man is special, and it needs to be treated that way.” Look at the opposite example that Agur goes on to give us in verse 20.

²⁰ “This is the way of an adulterous woman:
She eats and wipes her mouth
and says, ‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’” (Prov. 30:20)

How are the subjects of love and sex so often treated in our contemporary world? Are they pictured as we find them in verses 18 and 19 as almost magical and worthy of the most careful respect? Or is the modern attitude toward love and sex more like what we find in verse 20? “She eats and wipes her mouth and says, ‘No big deal.’” Today it is tragic that sex is treated as if it has no more significance than grabbing a hamburger at the drive-up window. “It’s no big deal.”

Proverbs 30:18-20 call us to humility when it comes to love and sex. God knows so much more about those subjects than any of us do. God has given them to us as good and enjoyable gifts that should be handled with care. Let’s resolve to live according to what God says and not according to what our culture says.

What about verses 21 through 23? What do they ask us to consider?

²¹ “Under three things the earth trembles,
under four it cannot bear up:
²² a servant who becomes king,
a godless fool who gets plenty to eat,
²³ a contemptible woman who gets married,
and a servant who displaces her mistress.” (Prov. 30:21-23)

In these verses the key word is “trembles.” “Under three things the earth trembles.” God is warning us about the abuse of power. Power can be abused in public settings—that’s verse 22. Think about bullying, sexual harassment at work, or police abuse. Power can also be abused in the privacy of the home—that’s verse 23. We think about child abuse or wife abuse or abuse of an elderly member of a family. In either of those two settings Agur says that “the earth trembles.” The abuse of power is like an earthquake in its destructive capability.

We like to think that it is only other people who could be guilty of things like that, not people like you and me. But humility requires all of us to take a hard look at how we use the power that we have. You and I

can be in a position of authority—in the government or in the home or in a school or in our place of employment or in the church—and misuse the power that has been granted to us. That is a sobering reality, isn't it?

We all need to humble ourselves before God and ask whether we have in some way misused the authority that God has granted to us. If that is true about us, then we need to admit it and apologize for it, and then go and seek out help so we don't do it again. The same is true if any of us are being abused by someone who has authority over us. If that is true, then we need to go and talk to someone about what is happening so that we can be protected from it happening again.

With his next example we find Agur changing his tone. Here is a positive message.

²⁴ “Four things on earth are small,
yet they are extremely wise:
²⁵ Ants are creatures of little strength,
yet they store up their food in the summer;
²⁶ hyraxes [picture a rabbit with small ears and no tail] are creatures of little power,
yet they make their home in the crags;
²⁷ locusts have no king,
yet they advance together in ranks;
²⁸ a lizard can be caught with the hand,
yet it is found in kings' palaces.” (Prov. 30:24-28)

The key words in that passage are found in verse 24: “small” and “extremely wise.” Sometimes we look at our lives and our own accomplishments, and we get discouraged, don't we? Why? It's because our lives seem so small. Isn't that true for all of us? At one time we had so many hopes and dreams. But now we see that they are not going to be fulfilled the way we had imagined. So what have we accomplished in life?

As Christians, we often add another dimension to that disappointment: “God must be disappointed in me too. I wanted to do so much for him. But look at me now.” Agur tells us to ponder these little unimpressive animals and then remember that they are the wise ones. Their accomplishments may seem small, but they are doing what God designed them to do. And that is what truly counts.

The same positive and encouraging message comes through in Agur's final set of comparisons.

²⁹ “There are three things that are stately in their stride,
four that move with stately bearing:
³⁰ a lion, mighty among beasts,
who retreats before nothing;
³¹ a strutting rooster, a he-goat,
and a king secure against revolt.” (Prov. 30:29-31)

The key word is “stately” or “majestic” (NKJV). Here are four examples of nobility. They provide us with pictures of confidence and poise and assurance.

That's what humility before God can produce within you and me too. To know how God wants you to live and then to live that way—over time that produces a sense of confidence and assurance. Sometimes we are disappointed in ourselves. But deep in your soul you know that you are living the way that God himself has designed life, and you are living it in the place where he has put you. That's what counts! So you humble yourself before God and embrace the life that he has given to you.

Conclusion and Closing Prayer

This morning we have just scanned the topics that Proverbs 30 touches upon. In all of them we need to practice humility. We need to live according to what God says is true when it comes to:

Money
Attitude
Contentment
Love
Power
Small aspects of life

Is there one of those that you need to talk to God about today? “Oh God, I have been deceiving myself. I am not as smart and not as good as I think I am when it comes to this particular part of life”?

Let’s humble ourselves before God. Please bow your head. Let’s confess our need and ask God for his wisdom and help. Let’s ask God to teach us humility.

“Lord, we need you. We need you so desperately. Please show us where we are lacking in wisdom and then teach us your truth so we can live humbly in your presence.

“Then we ask, God, that you would also fulfill your promise. As we humble ourselves according to your truth, please fill us with that sense of confidence and assurance that we are truly pleasing you.”

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